



A VERY *Merry* BRICK-MAS

ROYAL BASTARDS MC



International Bestselling Author
DARLENE TALLMAN

A VERY MERRY BRICK-MAS

ROYAL BASTARDS MC
BOOK 2

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A Very Merry Brick-mas - A Royal Bastards MC holiday novella
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have to take a brief moment before I hop into the shower and destroy the awesome 'deadline perfume' I've been wearing to acknowledge a few folks.

Crimson and Nikki, y'all's commitment to creating a world that so many of us clamor to write in is astounding. I'm sure there've been wrinkles along the way, but neither the readers nor newer authors who've joined with their own chapters have that first clue so kudos for being able to do that!

Nicole Lloyd, your staunch loyalty this past year has kept me going sometimes when the path seemed a bit daunting and challenging and all I can say is, "We did it!" when it comes to the goals set and smashed. Here's to 2023 and all it's shaping up to be.

Liberty and Erin - the two of you have spent so much time on the phone with me, sometimes listening to me read to see if it makes sense, sometimes going to Google to research a word while I kept banging away.

My fellow RBMC authors whose characters I've used (and those I will be using in the coming books) - thank you for your friendship in this crazy indie author journey. I love signings when we're able to reconnect over a drink (or two) and a good meal. We definitely seem to feed off one another, that's for darned sure.

This year was a crazy one where I ended up going to ten different signings all across the country (and even one in Canada!), plus had four I was unfortunately unable to go to when one of my beloved pets decided she was outdone with me and developed some major health issues, then Gypsy, my Jeep, decided she wanted to spend two separate but equally expensive visits at the service department for non-warranty work. Said vehicle added nearly

18,000 miles to the odometer thanks to my road-tripping, which were some of the best thanks to being able to drag my sissy along for the ride. I also, somehow, managed to publish (either solo or co-written) twenty-seven books this year (I think, it's a little bit hazy...hahahaha)!

So, there are many folks who came along with me for this year's wild ride and to y'all I say, thanks. Because without folks who believe in what I'm doing or readers to read what I've published, there'd be no reason to keep on keeping on, y'know?

Merry Christmas; I hope you enjoy this peek into the Roanoke, Virginia's holiday celebration!

XOXOXOXO

DAR

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DEDICATION

For those I love who are “December babies” - Tony, Dani, Aaron, Charlotte, and Austin - two of you called me ‘Mom’ growing up, one of you calls me your (hopefully beloved) mother-in-law, another calls me ‘Aunt Darlene’ and as for the current youngest one, you’ll call me ‘Gramma’ when you really start talking. And for the tiniest one, who is scheduled to appear in this world on 12/9/22, Master Theo, you’re already so anticipated and I’m glad I’ll ‘be home for Christmas’ so I get to meet you firsthand!

Each of you are loved, regardless of whether I get to see/talk to you frequently or not and I hope you have the best holiday season ever.

With love,

Mom/Darlene/Aunt Darlene/Gramma

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ROYAL BASTARDS AUTHORS

“2022 CHRISTMAS/YULE/HOLIDAY AUTHORS”

DANI RENE: *Yule Tyed* - releases 12/2/22

GLENNA MAYNARD: *Loving the Biker* - releases 12/9/22

KL RAMSEY: *Mistletoe & Mayhem* - releases 12/11/22

MORGAN JANE MITCHELL: *Pagan's X-mas* - releases 12/13/22

DARLENE TALLMAN: *A Very Merry Brick-mas* - releases 12/20/22

NIKKI LANDIS: *Santa Biker* - releases 12/23/22

KRISTINE ALLEN: *Raptor's Revenge* - releases 12/27/22

B.B. BLAQUE: *Chemicals & Hormones* - releases 12/25/22

CRIMSON SYN: *The Winter Biker* - releases 12/30/22

- ROYAL BASTARDS MC FACEBOOK GROUP -

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/royalbastardsmc/>

Website- <https://www.royalbastardsmc.com/>

[OceanofPDF.com](https://www.oceanofpdf.com)

ROYAL BASTARDS CODE

PROTECT: The club and your brothers come before anything else, and must be protected at all costs. **CLUB** is **FAMILY**.

RESPECT: Earn it & Give it. Respect club law. Respect the patch. Respect your brothers. Disrespect a member and there will be hell to pay.

HONOR: Being patched in is an honor, not a right. Your colors are sacred, not to be left alone, and **NEVER** let them touch the ground.

OL' LADIES: Never disrespect a member's or brother's Ol' Lady. **PERIOD.**

CHURCH is **MANDATORY**.

LOYALTY: Takes precedence over all, including well-being.

HONESTY: Never **LIE**, **CHEAT**, or **STEAL** from another member or the club.

TERRITORY: You are to respect your brother's property and follow their Chapter's club rules.

TRUST: Years to earn it...seconds to lose it.

NEVER RIDE OFF: Brothers do not abandon their family.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

RBMC, ROANOKE, VA CHAPTER

Brick - President
Banshee - VP
Scythe - Enforcer
Kracken - SAA
Brew - Secretary
Gypsy - Tail Gunner
Hawg - IT Tech
Kicks - Chaplain
Rainman - Treasurer
Phantom - Cleaner
Rooster - Patched member
Chains - Patched member
Jingles - Patched member
Jaydn - Prospect
Haydn - Prospect

CLUB GIRLS

Leathyr
Layce
Sunshine
Stormy



Santa is coming, and for the first time in years, the Roanoke, VA club plans to celebrate. When the past reveals itself, mysteries begin to unravel while new ones emerge.

When Brick decided to bring his father, RiffRaff, back to the clubhouse to live, he had no idea the mysterious words spoken by Madame Laveaux would be unraveled thanks to his father living in the past.

Now that the secret's out, will Rayleigh be able to handle the fact her past wasn't her reality? Finding out she's a long-lost club princess has her doubting everything she was ever told. Add to that, she now finds herself under the protection of an older brother, one whose guilt has him overcompensating while she tries to find her way.

Meanwhile, even though it's the holiday season, the bad guys never rest, so the club is faced with enemies from the past. Enemies they thought were long dispatched to the pits of Hades. With the help of their new brothers, will everyone finally be able to enjoy the beauty of the season, or will they be thrust into another situation where they're flying blind?

****Suitable for ages 18+ due to adult age, content, language, and situations****

AUTHORS NOTE

“A Very Merry Brick-mas” starts with the *Epilogue* from “Brick’s House” as the prologue and of course, continues on... just to refresh you as to what was happening!

XOXO

DAR

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PROLOGUE

BRICK

The information I finally received from Phantom is burning a hole in my stomach. While no one but me and of course, the lab, know what the paper says, I know it's going to blow everything we all thought we knew sky-fucking-high.

For the first time since taking over the gavel, I'm honestly unsure how to proceed. One thing's for sure, I'm glad Banshee and Rooster have finally made it back.

"You've been missed, Brother," I say as we sit at a table in the common room drinking and catching up after Church.

With the holidays fast approaching, we covered upcoming runs as well as what expectations I had regarding covering all the shifts at our businesses since a few of the brothers are heading out to see their own families.

"Can't believe you've been gone as long as you were," Pops says, grinning at Banshee. "I can't run this place without two of my best men."

Banshee raises his brow at me, and I shrug, not wanting to contradict him since he still thinks he's in charge. "Had a job to do, RiffRaff," he replies. "You taught us to see everything through to the end, no matter how long it takes."

"Yeah, I did, didn't I?" Pops muses. "Well, you're here now, this place looks like Santa's workshop, and we're doing good as a club. We've got a lot to celebrate, that's for fucking sure."

As brothers move in and out of the room, I see two of the new club whores approach. They blatantly ignore my glare as well as my shaking head and one winds her arms around Ban's shoulders, an absolute fucking mistake judging from the look on his now-menacing face.

"Get your fucking hands off me. I didn't ask to be touched. Don't you two know the fucking rules around here?" he questions, his tone almost lethally quiet.

"Not sure what rules you're talking about," the redhead states, glancing at her friend whose wrists are now captured in one of Banshee's hands.

"Know that one's a lie because Leathyr told me she sat you both down and went over what's expected of a club whore around here."

"How do you know she wasn't the one who lied?" Red, the name I'm gonna call her, sneers.

"Because she's never lied about anything a day in her fucking life. Now get your fucking hands off him!" Pops roars out, causing both of them to stumble back and fall on their asses. "Seems you two are out before you even got the chance to ride biker cock. Sucks to be you, I'd say, but since you're not staying, I don't fucking care. Prospects! Get the trash out and hurry before the stench of their cheap-ass perfume ruins my good mood."

The two new prospects rush over and help the women up before practically pushing them out the front door.

"Looks like the twins were a good choice for prospecting," Ban says, waving his hand for another longneck beer.

Stormy grabs several then brings them over. She nods at RiffRaff and states, "We thought they might be trouble, but Hawg vetted them and told Leathyr to give them the talk and a chance. Looks like we might have dodged several bullets by getting rid of them. Glad you and Rooster are back, Banshee. Y'all have been missed." With a wink, she moves back to the bar then immediately starts passing out drinks to the other brothers waiting.

Because of where I'm seated, I spot Rayleigh walking down the hallway, Hobbes riding on her shoulder as she heads toward the kitchen. Pops, seeing her as well, raises his brows then turns to me, asking, "When did Lorelei

color her hair and how long has she had a damn cat?”

I watch Banshee’s face whiten when he hears his mother’s name mentioned; the faint hope the past fifteen or so years were just a bad fucking dream. He turns and when he spots Rayleigh, he goes sheet white as the beer bottle drops from his fingers.

When she turns, he whispers, “RyRy?”

RAYLEIGH

Silence permeates the air as I turn to stare at Brick. RiffRaff has been calling me Lorelei which I thought was a bit odd, but he’s been diagnosed as having Alzheimer’s, so I just figured I reminded him of someone he must’ve cared about in his past.

It turns out, I apparently do, and not only that, but the tall, bald—except for a mohawk biker, must think I do as well if his words, actions, and current expression are any indication.

“I don’t know anyone by that name,” I cautiously reply. I can see from the flash on his cut he’s Banshee, Brick’s best friend as well as being the vice president of the club. I haven’t met him yet because he’s been out of town helping another brother on a personal matter.

I see Banshee turn toward Brick and notice his eyes are glassy and hazy. “Brother?” he whispers to my ol’ man. His words come out choppy as if he’s swallowing past a lump and even though I don’t know him, his overall appearance gives off the look of someone having the weight of the world on their shoulders.

“Rayleigh, Banshee, we need to talk, but not right here where others can overhear us. Let’s head into my office so we can hash this out,” Brick suggests instead of replying directly to Banshee. “As for the rest of y’all, we’ll have Church once the three of us have wrapped things up.”

“Brick, since when do you call Church?” RiffRaff asks, his eyes drawn upward into his hairline, confusion blanketing his face.

It dawns on me that he’s wearing a cut that’s different from what Brick and

the other guys wear, but right now, that's the least of my worries.

I need to know why Banshee said what he did and also who the hell I really am. I'm confused and have a feeling things are fixing to come to light that will change my future forevermore.

"Pops, trust me on this one," Brick replies, placing a gentle, yet firm hand on his pops' shoulders as he passes by, finally reaching my side and taking my hand in his, guiding me down the hallway.

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CHAPTER ONE

RAYLEIGH

Once we make our way into Brick's office, he immediately sits on the leather couch that takes up one side of the room and pulls me into his lap, kissing my temple. Yep, I'm positive he's gearing up to tell me something that'll have my world tilting on its axis.

"Gonna need you to keep your cool, brother," he says to Banshee, who sits on the opposite end of the couch, turned sideways facing us.

Banshee continues to stare at me, a myriad of emotions flowing across his face until eventually, he gives in and nods at Brick. "I'm good, Brick," he states, his face now devoid of any expression at all.

"Okay, so while you were gone, Pops said something one day while we were in Church. I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up in case what I was suspecting was wrong, so I went into your room and grabbed your toothbrush, then took a drink Rayleigh had and got the DNA from both of y'all ran to have my suspicions confirmed. Ban, I know what we were all led to believe all those years ago, but those fuckers *lied* to us."

"I don't understand," I whisper, my head volleying between the two men as they speak. "Who lied about what?" My mind's spinning right now and I can't stop the sensation of feeling as though I'm falling down a deep, dark, black hole.

"When we were kids, some members of the Demon Devils MC came by one day and kidnapped a little girl," Brick quietly informs me. "All the brothers were in Church, but after Banshee woke up from being knocked out, he ran

inside bellowing frantically for help. The brothers scoured the area but came up with nothing and of course, the fuckers taunted the club with pictures they sent. Those pictures made it appear as though the little girl was dead, sweetheart.”

“Who was she?” I ask, waving my hand vicariously through the air wanting him to continue instead of stalling. I need him to get on with it and stop worrying about how I’m going to take whatever news it is he’s hesitant to share.

“You,” he spits out.

One word.

One damn word that changes everything I thought I knew about myself.

The black abyss I am currently on the edge of embraces me like a long-lost friend, and for the first time, I welcome the darkness as it enfolds me, the words I’ve heard resounding in my brain.



Long minutes pass until I come to only to find both Brick and Banshee standing sentry over me, peering down at me with worry written all over their faces.

While Brick is obviously concerned, Banshee has tears freely flowing down his face which now has me contemplating what that means.

Why is someone I’ve only just met overwrought with such intense emotions?

“Ryleigh? You’re saying she’s Ryleigh, Brother?” he queries. “But how? How is this possible? Explain this to me, I saw the pictures.”

Brick’s expression turns to one of molten rage as he rounds on his brother. “What the fuck? Who thought it would be a good idea for a kid to see those?” he thunders, his fists clenched.

I’m stuck wondering about these pictures Banshee is talking about. I honestly

feel as though I've been dropped in the middle of an episode of a reality television show or something; nothing makes any sense and the feeling of being overwhelmed has me fighting the urge to completely shut down emotionally.

"It wasn't like that, Brick," Banshee advises. "I overheard my parents talking after RiffRaff left and my dad mentioned pictures floating around the clubhouse that he had gathered up and brought home. Since my mom was hysterically crying, he was focused on her, so he never saw me sneak down and look at the folder sitting open on the kitchen table. Fuck!" he bellows out, pulling at his hair. A look of guilt crosses his face before he crouches next to me. "I'm so fucking sorry, Ry. I tried to keep them from taking you."

"You were a kid, Ban," Brick says, trying to soothe him. "Not much a kid can do against a grown ass adult. The thing is, why *did* they do that? Why the fuck would they want us to believe she was dead?"

"Probably to traffic her," Banshee spits out, the veins in his neck visibly bulging. "They were into that shit, remember? Our fathers were always talking about it around us, even though I'm sure they didn't realize how much we were listening in on their conversations."

"Traffic?" I weakly whisper, my tone wheezy.

"But that obviously didn't happen. There's more we don't know about what happened." Brick's fists clench and unclench as he speaks.

"Sounds like Church to me," Banshee retorts. "Because if any of those fuckers are still out there, alive and breathing, they need to fucking pay for their sins."

A brother.

I have a brother.

That means at one time, I had a different mother and father, ones who cared, ones whose blood flows through me.

Laura and Dave were not my true parents and that makes me thankful. I understand a little better why they acted as though I was a burden, and disposable, because to them, I was. They were probably never meant to watch

me for very long, they were likely a stopping place until the next phase of whatever the ultimate plan was, was executed. But it sounds as though something happened and I ended up staying. Well, until they handed me over to Enoch in order to pay the fee for their drug debt, that is.

Thankfully, none of those three are left to personally haunt my life. It's bad enough, my dreams are fraught with terrors as I relive my abuse again and again.

As darkness threatens to descend and wrap around me once again, I reach out and take Brick's hand in mine. "Thank you."

"For what, babe?"

"Giving me a family."

BRICK

Once I have Rayleigh settled into our bed, I head back through the common room and holler for church. While waiting for the brothers to arrive and for their asses to hit their seats, I grab a bottle of tequila and quickly throw back a few shots.

Directly from the rim of the bottle.

The burn is harsh but reminds me I need to tread lightly while we unravel the mysteries of the past.

After the brothers file in, I slam the gavel down and bellow, "Shut the fuck up, we've got shit to discuss!"

And a riddle to solve because nobody knows why.

Why did they want us to think my ol' lady was dead?

Granted, she wasn't my ol' lady then, we were literally kids, but still, they perpetuated a lie so the club would stop looking for her. There's something else more devious at play here, we just need to go through everything and figure out what that thing is.

Since everyone was in the main room when Banshee lost his shit seeing

Rayleigh, I gaze at my brothers before saying, “We’ve got a bit of a riddle to solve, brothers.”

“Talk to us, Pres,” Kracken replies. “We know some shit’s gone down, so give it to us straight and we’ll get to digging if that’s what we need to do.”

“Got my laptop, brother,” Hawg advises, pulling it out and opening it. His fingers are poised on the keyboard, ready to fly across the keys and dig through the web at a moment's notice, letting me know he’s ready to start searching for whatever I need.

A wave of gratitude washes over me.

All of these men have been with me since we were the Roanoke Raiders. Hell, I grew up with most of them by my side; all of us legacies, following in our fathers’ footsteps like they did their own fathers. RiffRaff’s dad, my grandfather, Astro, was the original president, his best friend, Buck, was Bonzai’s father.

Tradition flows through our veins; we’ve been steeped in this lifestyle since before we were glimmers in our fathers’ eyes.

“So, to lay it out as concisely as possible, Rayleigh is actually *Ryleigh*, brothers,” I state.

“Wait, no fucking way! She was killed when we were kids,” Kracken bellows.

“That’s what we were led to believe,” Banshee says, picking up the story. “Apparently, RiffRaff asked a question about why Lorelei was here or something when he was looking at the pictures on our wall and Brick decided to do a little sleuthing. He got something of mine from my room while I was gone, and also something from Ry, I mean Rayleigh, and had the DNA run on it. She’s my sister, without any doubt, brothers. The one we were told was dead by those motherfucking slimy assholes, the Demon Devils MC.”

“Most of the brothers who were around back then are either retired now or six feet under. How the fuck are we gonna get the info we need?” Brew muses, tapping his fingers against the surface of the table.

“What do you wanna know?” RiffRaff questions, looking surprisingly lucid

right now. Considering earlier he was confused; I'm taking this as a win because he'd be the one to give us answers or at least point us in the right direction.

I've noticed that despite the fact he's failing health wise, and he definitely forgets shit thanks to his Alzheimer's, since moving him back to the clubhouse property, he has periods of clarity. I won't delude myself into thinking he'll ever get better because that's simply not gonna happen, but when he sounds like I remember him from growing up, it does something to me.

"Okay, Pops, so once y'all figured out it was the Demon Devils, what happened?" I query.

"We killed as many of those motherfuckers as we could find when we got the proof they sent us that they killed Ryleigh," he replies. "Some escaped, but when those pussies ran Bonzai and Lorelei off the road and killed them, we took care of the rest. They're all gone, brothers. Every single one of them."

"So, you killed the women and kids too?" Kicks asks, his brow raised.

Even in our club's earlier days, women and children were off the table, untouchable, and never part of any disagreement. We might've been on the left side of legal in many regards, but we have a moral compass. Some would say it's a bit skewed, and they'd be correct in that assumption. But the fact remains, we have our code we live by, period.

"Uh, no," RiffRaff slowly says. "They're never fucked with, Kicks, you know the rules."

"In that case, if any kids survived, they could end up gunning for us, searching for payback," Banshee remarks. "It's what we'd do, brothers, and we've got far more honor in our left pinky than those sacks of shit ever thought of having."

"I'm on it, Pres," Hawg states, his fingers flying. "We need names," he murmurs, almost to himself.

"Brick, check the old notes from the year Ryleigh was abducted," RiffRaff commands as if he's still running shit around here. "We wrote down every road name of anyone we detained and interrogated."

I chuckle but the sound is dark because their form of interrogation during that time ended up with the person being questioned becoming worm food.

“Yeah, okay, Pops.”

Brew stands and goes over to the huge safe embedded into the sheetrock and once he unlocks it, he spends several minutes going through the old binders until he locates the one he was searching for and pulls the file out.

Right now, I’m grateful as fuck we have our notes and shit embedded on an encrypted site that Hawg created because all those papers show a shit ton of felonious activities.

“Hawg, how hard would it be to add the old shit to our secured site?” I question with an inquisitive look. “Just thinking of the possible ramifications should any of it ever get out there, y’know?”

“I can scan them, Pres, then we can have a good old-fashioned bonfire if you’d like,” Hawg replies.

“Good. That’s a solid plan, let’s get on it. And you’re positive the site cannot be accessed?”

I mean, I know enough about computers to check my emails, which are mostly junk, and play a few online games, plus of course, the payroll systems for the businesses, but outside of that, I’m fucking clueless and useless.

“Fucking one hundred percent, Pres. The way I’ve got it set up is it actually bounces and pings around a few towers with no set IP address,” Hawg promises.

“You’re speaking Greek to me, brother. As long as none of us are gonna go down for anything, I’m good,” I retort, which has everyone laughing. “Yeah, yeah, yuck it up, fuckers, you know good and well y’all are as bad if not worse than me when it comes to computer shit.”



We now have a list of names of members from the Demon Devils MC that

Hawg is tracking down to see if there were any survivors. While his computers are running searches, most of us are sitting in the common area drinking.

I checked on my ol' lady after dismissing church and she's still out, so now I need to focus on my brother, who's had one helluva shock.

He went from being alone to finding out he's got his sister back.

A sister who doesn't remember him, doesn't remember *any* of us. That part hurts my heart simply because I've felt the connection to her since the first time I laid eyes on her in that ditch, even with me not knowing who she was then. I remember as a kid helping Banshee watch over his baby sister; how she would toddle to me and want me to pick her up when she started walking.

While I definitely didn't have any inappropriate feelings way back then, I still remember her patting my cheek and saying, "My Brick. You is mine."

"You okay, brother?" I ask, breaking the silence as I watch Banshee down another shot. He's shooting straight Fireball and I know his gut has to be roiling by now, but he's a grown ass man, so I'm not gonna stop him or monitor his liquor intake.

I do motion for Stormy to come over and when she leans in, I quietly order, "Grab him a bottle of water and some aspirin, will ya, babe? And another beer for me."

"Sure thing, Brick. Is Rayleigh okay?" she queries. I notice her words and concerns come across as being honest and sincere.

That's something I'll never get used to, but in reality, while all clubs are different, my grandfather and father made sure the club girls we had were decent human beings, for lack of a better way to say it. They didn't cause any fucking drama, or go after the taken men. They respected the ol' ladies and helped out around the clubhouse when they weren't taking care of the single brothers.

What blows me away, though, is how they've really banded around Rayleigh the way they have. Maybe it's because they're older than she is, maybe it's because a few, like Leathyr, were around when she was stolen from us. Even though they don't know yet that she is Ryleigh, they still grasped that she was

very innocent and naive about life in general.

I've been watching my ol' lady gain confidence in herself and my concern now is how this news might send her spiraling backwards.

"I think she'll be just fine, Stormy. Thank you for your concern."

"Be right back with the stuff, Brick," she replies, winking at me.

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CHAPTER TWO

RAYLEIGH

Waking up in the middle of the night, I feel Brick's warmth at my back while Hobbes purrs contentedly around the top of my head, both of these things settle me, and I end up feeling content.

So many thoughts are running rampant through my brain, I don't really know where to start or how to sort them in an order so I can begin processing them fully.

"You okay, babe?" His rumbling voice is sleep-laden as a puff of his warm breath caresses the back of my neck, making me shiver.

"There's a lot to think about, Brick." My voice is whisper soft since I don't want to break the cozy silence by talking any louder than I am.

"I understand, but the main takeaway for you is you're a club princess, you've always been one. While it fucking sucks how you grew up, those fuckers are dead and gone and I swear that you'll never be hurt again."

"You can't promise something like that, though, not realistically."

And in reality, he can't.

I know they've likely got some sworn enemies, and regardless of how big the club he's a part of now truly is, they're stationed around the world, not all downstairs. So even if shit comes at them from an unknown threat, there's no way everyone could respond in time to prevent anyone from being injured. Which means, I *could* potentially be hurt again.

“Maybe not, so instead, I’ll say it this way. If anyone thinks they’re going to harm one strand of hair on your head, they’re going to pray for a quick and easy death by the time I’m done with them. *That* much I can promise you, Raleigh. Because if I don’t do it, your brother sure as hell will.”

“I always wished for a brother,” I confess. “Someone to ride in and save the day, you know? Like all the books I read as a little girl when I was still in school, and the prince swooped in and protected the maiden from the fire-breathing dragon.”

“Well, if fairytales are true, then you’ve gone through the nightmare years and now it’s time for the happily-ever-after, sweetheart.”

“You know they’re not, but I will say I’m thankful you gave me the time I needed.”

“It sure the fuck wasn’t easy,” he replies, chuckling. “Not gonna tell you how many times the brothers talked me down from riding over to your place, tossing you over my shoulder then bringing you back to my lair.”

I can’t help the giggle that escapes as I turn in his embrace so I can cup his cheek in my hand. Looking up at him, I kiss his lips. “But you didn’t, and that means more to me than anything, Brick. I know I’ve still got a ways to go with this whole lifestyle change, but having the knowledge now about how to do the things I didn’t know how to do before makes it a lot easier to process and handle. That probably doesn’t make any sense, does it?” I question.

“It does. If I had bulldozed in and brought you here without letting you make decisions and choices on your own, no matter how well I would have treated you, I would have been no better than your captors were.”

“No! That’s not true, you would never lay a hand on me with the intention to hurt me,” I vehemently protest.

“Not what I meant, Ray. Your whole life, what you can remember of it, anyhow, you’ve had every facet of your day controlled. Then, when you didn’t do what you were told, or didn’t do it the way they wanted, you were punished. While that definitely wouldn’t happen here, how long would it have taken for you to completely shrink into yourself if I had just barreled on

into your life instead of being patient?”

I look at him with wonder in my eyes. “Maybe you’re right. I know I can discuss things with you and even get upset or angry and you’re not going to lash out at me.”

“Not gonna happen, babe. I might be in a shit mood and a bit short-tempered, but I’ll never knowingly direct that toward you. It’s not how I was raised and not what I believe in.”

“Can you tell me more about that day?” I quietly ask. “I mean, if you were there, that is. I don’t want to ask Banshee because it’s obviously very traumatic for him if yesterday was any indication.”

He rolls over onto his back and pulls me snugly against his side tucking me in, his hand now caressing along my arm and back. Both Calvin and Hobbes get themselves adjusted since he disrupted their sleep and are soon purring once again, using us as their beds.

I giggle slightly thinking about the fact they’ve got a fancy cat tree in the sitting area, and several different beds all around our suite, yet they prefer to sleep on us.

“What’s got you tickled, babe?” he asks, kissing my forehead.

“Just look at these two, Brick! They’ve got fancy beds and stuff yet where are they sleeping? On top of us. Not only that, but I caught them curled up in the bathroom sink yesterday.”

He chuckles then says, “Cats are curious by nature. Bet the sink’s porcelain was cooler for them to curl up in or something to that extent.”

“We have *snow* on the ground and Christmas is right around the corner.”

“We’ve got a few weeks for the fat man in the red suit, babe.”

“I have to finish my shopping,” I mutter, completely bypassing the subject at hand.

“The day you were kidnapped—” he starts, leaving the sentence hanging, causing my breath to seize in my body.

Suddenly, I feel as though the information he's about to impart is going to shatter the rest of me and I desperately wish I had kept my mouth shut instead of asking him to recall that grim day.

"Maybe I don't need to know this," I hesitantly murmur, gnawing on my bottom lip.

"Yeah, you do, sweetheart," he says, using his thumb and finger to pull my lip free from my teeth. "It was early spring, and the club was preparing to have a family day, complete with a cookout along with all the bells and whistles. Me and Ban were two of the oldest kids in the club, and typically, we were tasked with keeping an eye on all of you younger ones. That day, I had a doctor's appointment for a sports physical, so I wasn't there with him. Maybe if I had been, the club brothers could've found you sooner."

"Why would you say that?" I ask. "You were a child too, Brick."

"Because Ban says only one person was in the van and if he was busy knocking Ban out, I could've run for help," he supplies, anguish coating his tone. "I feel as responsible as Banshee does, sweetheart."

"The only person or persons who are responsible are the ones who chose to be assholes and steal a little girl from her family, then make it look like she was dead to taunt said family," I angrily retort. "*They're* the assholes, Brick. *Not* you, *not* Banshee, and *not* my parents, hell, not even anyone who was in the club back then. From what you've said so far, they scoured the local area looking for me and had the cops involved. I get the impression y'all aren't too fond of law enforcement so for the club to call them in, y'all left no stone unturned."

I take a deep breath in order to compose myself while lovingly patting his face.

Once I feel as if I can continue without adding to his angst, I insist, "I don't remember any of that, which actually sounds like a good thing for my mental well-being, but it kills me inside that you and my brother have harbored this guilt for all of these past years."

"It was a bad time for the club, sweetheart," he continues, his voice now somber. "Your parents would go out riding every day tracking down leads,

taking backroads, doing whatever they could to see if they could recover your body. Because they were under the impression you were actually dead. Hell, they wouldn't have a funeral since no body was recovered."

"What happened then?" I ask, my voice tremulous as I hold back tears thinking of the parents I don't remember doing everything they can to find me.

I was loved... unconditionally.

Adored.

Cherished.

Those thoughts knit together, weaving together that broken piece of my heart and soul as the realization of what lengths they went to in order to find me courses through my psyche.

BRICK

She seems to be taking all of this information I'm tossing at her rather well, although, I've felt her tremble a few times. Giving in to my desire to kiss her, I do so, my heart swelling at the love I feel for this woman.

She's been beaten down but isn't broken. Just like the phoenix, she's been steadily rising from the proverbial ashes and glimmering in shades of red and orange instead of dim hues of gray and black.

Breathless, I pull back, happy to see her kiss-swollen lips tipped up in a smile. "So, on that day, while all the old ladies were fixing the side dishes, Ban and the rest of the kids including you, were on the side of the property where we used to have a play area. The brothers had built one of those massive swing set monstrosities, complete with slides, a climbing wall, a teeter-totter, swings of course, and a clubhouse of sorts smack dab in the middle."

My chest aches and my heart burns as I remember that day and the ones that followed. Her loss affected each and every one of us and caused a black patch to settle into our souls.

Picking up the story from where I stalled, I continue by telling her, “The brothers were in Church during the event, with a few prospects patrolling the grounds, of course, when a white van pulled up near the fence. Ban said he saw them and started yelling for the kids to move toward the back of the play area which was off the kitchen when a scrawny guy jumped the fence and scooped you up. When Ban went after him, he backhanded him in the head, knocking him completely out.”

“Why didn’t any of the other kids go for help?” I ask. “I mean, that’s what I would’ve done under the circumstances. What about the prospects? Where were they?”

“The other kids had gone into the kitchen and were getting snacks from the old ladies and club girls which distracted them enough they didn’t mention what happened outside. Plus, most of them were four or five at most if memory serves. They didn’t realize there was danger because Ban didn’t tell them that, he just simply told them to head inside and that it was time for a snack.”

“Oh, well, that makes sense, but why weren’t the prospects outside overseeing the kids left behind... like me and Banshee?”

“Because believe it or not, they were out and about gathering the shit needed for the cookout at the big box store in town. They came back loaded down with ice, chips, meats, alcohol, beer, soda, juice boxes, and paper products to absolute fucking chaos.”

She nods but doesn’t say anything, so I continue. “Ban came to, and the van was gone so he hightailed it into the clubhouse and went flying into Church. Understand, sweetheart, that *no one* enters those doors unless they’re a patched member or they’ve been previously invited in by one of the men. So, when the door flew open, Ban was suddenly faced with ten brothers’ guns pointed at him. After they realized it wasn’t an enemy charging in, he was able to tell them what happened. RiffRaff decided immediately to get the police involved against my grandfather’s best wishes.”

“Who is your grandfather?”

“Astro. He and his best friend were the ones who initially started the club, but he had turned the gavel over to my pops and was just a patched member at

the time when this took place, babe. Your dad also advocated for the cops being involved because as he said, and I quote, *the more people looking for you, the better the chance we had of getting you back.*”

“So, no family party, huh?” Her voice sounds sad and forlorn.

“The old ladies and prospects cooked everything and kept watch at the clubhouse, trying to keep things calm for the kids, while all the patched brothers and officers hit the streets once the police left. For about a week, at least five brothers were out for twelve hours a day searching for you. They ran in shifts, half staying here and resting while the other half was out and about. Every fucking lead, no matter how sketchy or small, was tracked down and thoroughly investigated. RiffRaff pulled in markers from other clubs, from some of the men the club has been associated with over the years that are quasi-allies, and even from the underground element here in Virginia.”

I feel her breath hitch from where my hand had been smoothly raking up and down her back, so I stop and clutch her closer to me.

When I feel the tension start to ease, I pick the story back up. “They came up empty every single day, sweetheart. Your mom was strong as fuck, she never openly cried after that first day. Instead, she kept shit organized at the clubhouse so the men who were out looking for her baby were well-fed and amply rested. Your dad aged twenty years overnight, I swear, but he never, not once, stopped looking for any trace of you. You have to believe me when I tell you this.”

“Brick, the fact that my brother looked like he saw a ghost yesterday and also how emotional he got in your office when he doesn’t give me the impression he’s got many soft parts, tells me how much this incident impacted everyone,” she conveys, her tone soothing and lulling me.

I didn’t realize my fist was clenched tightly along my side until she started stroking it. Once I unfurl it, she laces our fingers together.

“We can stop if you need to, I know it’s got to be hard remembering all of it.”

“No, I need you to know how everything played out. Sometime in the second week, an envelope was left at the gates addressed to RiffRaff. The prospect brought it in, Church was called, and they opened it to find color pictures of a

little girl, all bloody and bruised, unmoving and appearing to be deceased. I've never seen the pictures personally, sweetheart, but you heard Ban yesterday and he apparently *did* see them at some point. You looked dead in those pictures and the note only said, '*You'll never find her*' with nothing else for us to go on."

I take a second to keep my temper checked. I continue to stroke her skin, calming my erratic heartbeat.

"By then, we knew it was the Demon Devils MC behind your kidnapping, they were who had taken you, thanks to the markers and what-not the club had pulled in, but despite our enforcer's best efforts, little to no information was given. Still, each lead was followed until it ended, and intel dried up. The rest of the club, knowing we were gunning for them, went underground, but your dad and mom never stopped searching.

"Maybe five or six months after you were taken and presumed dead, they were out on a ride, just to get away from everything for a few hours, when a truck hit them and forced them off the road, down an embankment and into some trees. They were killed on impact, sweetheart."

"Oh, my God! Poor Banshee," she cries, tears now trickling down her face. "He lost so much in such a short period of time. What happened to him?"

"He came to live with RiffRaff and me," I tell her, trying to ease her worry over her brother. "My mom wasn't in the picture and wasn't really an intricate part of the club, so when that happened to you, my own mother, the woman who birthed me and should've loved me more than life itself, moved away. Haven't seen her since."

"One incident drastically changed so many people's lives," she states, now sobbing.

"Not your fault," I remind her, just like she did to me. "It was hard on the club, losing Bonzai and Lorelei, and that's when the club decided to have a funeral for you as well. Even though we didn't have a body in the physical sense, we buried your parents together, along with some of your favorite belongings, like a Cabbage Patch doll and your favorite blanket. I think Banshee put a heart necklace in there so you would 'look pretty for Jesus' or something like that."

I have to stop talking now, she's hysterically crying, clinging to me like a barnacle does to the bottom of a boat. "Shhh, I've got you, sweetheart. Let it out, it's going to be okay."

Over and over, I keep whispering nonsensical things to her in an effort to calm her down.

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CHAPTER THREE

RAYLEIGH

I'm not sure when my grief turns into an overwhelming, animalistic need for Brick, but his hands are igniting a fiery need deep inside.

"Brick?" I whisper. I'm still a bit unsure as far as initiating sex so I hope he'll be able to figure out what I'm needing from him.

"What, Ray?" he replies, leaning in to kiss my cheek.

"Can we, um, is it wrong, dammit, I don't know how to say this," I exclaim, so frustrated I ball my hands into fists.

"You need me to show you you're still alive, sweetheart?" he questions.

"Yes." My tone is now breathy because his hands have traveled underneath my nightshirt, stroking my bare skin, which pebbles with every brush of his fingers.

"We can do that, sweetheart, and it's not wrong. Nothing we do together will ever be wrong, do you understand?" His tone is fierce, so I nod in agreement.

Since it's been so intense, I look at him and softly confess what I'm visualizing, "I think it would be romantic under the tree, don't you?"

A grin lights up his face and he nods. "Let me get a blanket laid down so you don't get any rug burns."

He rolls out of bed, and I admire his muscled physique. He's wearing boxer briefs which showcase his thick, juicy thighs and firm ass. I can feel my face

heating up as my eyes continue to roam his body. Wide, broad shoulders that taper down to a waist which is framed with a gazillion pack which is way more than the standard six-pack. His Adonis belt has me salivating and when he turns after putting the thick comforter he grabbed from the bottom of the bed onto the floor near the sparkling lit tree, I can see the evidence of his desire in the thick, pulsing bulge.

“Keep licking your lips like that and you’re gonna be on your knees,” he smirkingly teases, stalking toward where I’m already sitting up in the bed.

Before I can say anything in rebuttal, he scoops me up then deposits me softly onto my feet.

As I slowly kneel before him, he stops me. “Wait.”

Huh. Well, I wasn’t expecting to be rejected so thoroughly. I know I haven’t really gone down on him all that much so I’m sure my technique leaves much to be desired, but right now, I’m feeling a bit... bereft. Tears start to well when I feel him kneel before me then stand again. Looking down, I see a pillow.

“What’s this?” I ask, my voice shaky with wrought emotion.

“My ol’ lady may kneel before me but she’s gonna do it in comfort,” he advises.

When he goes to slide his briefs down, I stop him. “Nuh uh, that’s for me to do,” I sass. “It’s my present to unwrap. I’ve got this, Brick.”

“Fuck yeah, you do,” he moans as my hands glide up his muscular thighs until I reach the apex of his waist. Slowly, ever so methodically slow, I ease them down his legs, his hard dick jutting outward and nearly smacking me in the face.

“Trying to blind me, I see,” I tease once he’s kicked his briefs to the side. “Let’s see what happens when you do that.”

I set about making him feel as good as he does me when he’s going down on me. As my hands massage his legs in a sensual manner, I’m kissing along his Adonis belt, going all around his massive hardon, which is steadily dripping with precum.

“Rayleigh,” he warns when I flick my tongue across the crown then moan as his flavor hits my tongue.

I’ve read where some are musky, some are sweet, some are tart, but Brick’s essence is out of this world leaking out his masculinity. Latching on, I draw him into my mouth as far as I can, then use my hands to stroke in a continuous motion while I lave his length with my tongue.

Over and over again, I bob up and down his thick length, varying my suction which has his legs trembling as he moans. His hands are buried in my hair at this point and the tiny bite of pain from the tug at my roots has me squirming as my core pulses. My breasts feel heavy, and I know even without looking down that my nipples could cut glass.

When I start gently massaging his ball sack, he growls, and his hands go underneath my armpits, and he pulls me to my feet before he ravishes my mouth. Soon, I’m the one groaning as his hands grope, pluck, and stroke me, igniting a white-hot flame of passion that’s sure to have me combusting if he doesn’t fill me soon.

“Brick,” I manage to moan. “I need you, handsome.”

“I got you, Ray,” he promises, taking us to the floor.

Looking up at his handsome face, which is fierce right now as lust overcomes him, I can see the softness thanks to the twinkling coming from the Christmas lights strewn throughout the tree. I didn’t want the ever-changing ones because they bother my eyes, but these are more subtle. They don’t flash, they ease from colors to solid muted white and right now, with the colors subtly washing over his body, he’s the most beautiful, picturesque thing I’ve ever seen.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you more,” he replies, softly kissing my upturned lips as his hand drifts from my thigh to my pussy.

My inner self is now cheering loudly; since he introduced me to the joys of physical intimacy, I crave him constantly, and right now is no different. His fingers skim between my glistening folds and while his index and middle fingers enter me, his thumb begins circling my clit.

“Keep that up and I’ll be coming before you get inside me,” I tell him.

He smirks and professes, “That was part of my master plan, sweetheart. You have no fucking idea how good it feels to have your pussy strangling my cock when I’m pounding inside you. None at all, but it’s the best fucking experience in the world. Nothing better.”

His fingers continue to piston inside me while his thumb tortuously stroking my distended clit and around it, which has my body tightening in preparation to explode. When he takes my nipple between his lips, I let go and allow my orgasm to crash through me, keening out his name as I ride the waves of euphoria.

“Brick, need you,” I pant out. He immediately moves so he’s hovering over me, his dick slotted against my entrance.

With one thrust, he’s buried balls deep and I open my eyes to see the look of sheer ecstasy on his face. “Feels so fucking good, babe,” he grinds out through his clenched teeth.

I can already feel another orgasm building as he slowly starts to move, increasing his pace while I thrust upward in an effort to increase the friction against my clit.

“Yeah, it does,” I tell him, my hands stroking along his arms and down his back.

Hell, wherever I can reach, I’m touching him at this point, my body poised to fall off the side of the biggest mountain ever. “Touch yourself, Ray,” he throatily commands.

While this is something I haven’t done before, I manage to get one of my hands between us then rub circles around my clit which also has me stroking the crown of his pistoning dick simultaneously.

“Oh fuck,” I cry out, my pussy starting to flutter.

“Let it go, Ray, I’ve got you,” he replies, sweat falling from his forehead onto mine. There are probably folks out there who would think that was gross, and I was one of them until Brick came along.

Not like I had any prior experience, but as I told him, I read a lot and whenever it would happen in a book, it would skeeve me out. However, every part of making love to Brick is good, even when we end up all sweaty.

As if my body was waiting for his command, an orgasm of tsunami proportions rolls through me, causing me to scream his name until I'm hoarse as I fervently clutch onto his bulging arms while my pussy constantly squeezes and releases his pounding dick.

Three thrusts later, he stills, and I feel his cum filling me to the point of overflowing. As he shudders and starts to fall downward, he manages to move in such a way that we're still connected but I'm now nestled on top.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he manages to say. "Fucking phenomenal, babe."

"I concur," I reply, adopting a British accent from a show we've been binge watching at night. "Most delightful."

He starts laughing and I soon join in as Calvin and Hobbes, curious about why their humans are frolicking on the floor, jump from the bed and come over to investigate.

BRICK

We stay cuddled on the floor for quite some time, talking about the upcoming Christmas festivities. I know she mentioned she has more Christmas shopping left to do, but the wrapped boxes and bags underneath the tree suggest otherwise.

However, with this being the first-ever Christmas that she has any semblance of control over, I refuse to take that immense joy away from her. If she wants to overbuy and overspend, well, I'm the man blessed with enough money to provide so she can do that without any worries over how to fund her shopping spree.

She lightly shivers so I tell her, "Let's get cleaned up, sweetheart, then get some shuteye. We've got lots of stuff to do in the upcoming weeks."

Grinning, she lets me help her onto her feet, then we spend a long time cleaning up, which may or may not have involved getting down and dirty all

over again.



“Pres, you need to call Church,” Hawg suggests when I walk into the common room the next morning.

“What the fuck for? We just had Church,” I ask through a clenched jaw.

“Found some follow up information on the remaining survivors of the Devil Demon Douches,” he supplies.

Looking around the area, I see that most of the guys aren’t here and accounted for, which means they’ve already left and are at work.

“Okay, send out a mass text stating that we’ll have it when work is done.” He nods his agreement, so I head into the kitchen, looking for some coffee.

I hate that I missed eating breakfast with Rayleigh, but despite her position as my ol’ lady, she still insists on working at the club businesses like she was so she ‘has her own money’ to spend or some shit. Since I love how feisty she’s become, I don’t push the issue, I just hate waking up on my own, which is somewhat ironic considering I’ve been single a long-ass time. Not only that, but even when I had longer relationships in the past, I never, not once, spent the night and for sure, no one ever spent it here with me. I wasn’t about to let a potential patch chaser sink her claws into me or get any ideas in her head that there was more than fucking.

Spotting Banshee, I make a mug of coffee and a plate of breakfast since it looks like either Stormy or Layce cooked, then head over to where he’s sitting, chowing down on his own breakfast.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing to a mismatched stack of DVD disks and VCR tapes. Fuck, I can’t remember the last time I saw a VCR.

“Old home movies.” His eyes are black rimmed as if he didn’t sleep, but there’s a light there now that’s been missing for a very long time. “Found them in my mom’s old memento box at the house and thought maybe she’d

want to watch them.”

I stare at my best friend while I process what he’s said. “Shit, you don’t think that would be too much for her, do you?”

“Not sure, but she deserves to know how much she was wanted before she was born, and how much she was loved as well as treasured by all of us once she got here, don’t you think?” he asks. “I mean, believe it or not, the VCR at my folks’ place still works.”

While he stayed with us after his parents died, we kept his family home up, as we tend to do for fallen brothers, doing maintenance and shit so when he came of age, he’d have his own place. I’m sure the memories there are painful and the reason why he still mostly stays at the clubhouse, but it’s good that he has somewhere to take Rayleigh so she can learn about her past.

“Run it by her, brother. She may be my ol’ lady, but she’s your sister and not only that, but she’s also capable of making that kind of decision for herself. If you think I should be there with y’all, you know I’ve got your back.”

“Thanks, Brick. I think it would be a good idea, don’t you? She’s a lot stronger than I thought she’d be considering what you’ve told me about when she was first found.”

“She’s fucking phenomenal, Ban. Not gonna lie, wasn’t sure she’d ever decide to become my ol’ lady because I gave her that choice, but she finally did. She’s always been the one, I just had no fucking clue, you know? Not only that, but her experiences while being on her own showed her what she wanted from life and not only that, but who she was as a person. She has her own identity now.”

“Do you think she’s going to want to keep being called Rayleigh or will she ever go back to being Ryleigh?” My friend asks with a frown marring his face.

“No clue. Guess I’ll add that to the list of things I need to do, huh? You let me know when you’re going to do the movie night and I’ll be there. If any are club events, we can always show them to everyone, but she gets the first look because I’m positive it’s going to be emotional as hell.”

“You got it.”



Once the workday is over and we're all making our way into Church, I look over my shoulder at the twins, our latest prospects, and state, "Grab a few bottles, some shot glasses, and beers then bring them on in."

"Got it, Pres," Jaydn replies. Of course, it could be Haydn for all I know because the fuckers are practically identical. Maybe I should just call them Thing One and Thing Two... something to ponder.

The brothers are basically bullshitting while we wait for the drinks to be brought into us when I hear, "Do y'all just sit around like this all day long?"

Glancing at the door, I see Murder, the President of the Charleston, West Virginia chapter standing there, smirking. "Don't block the doorway, brother, get the fuck in here," I order.

He walks on in, along with Viking, Smoke, Prodigy, and Static, which immediately has me on edge. Why would *five* of them show up here without any prior notification?

When the prospects return with the alcohol, I demand, "Grab some seats, Prospects. Our brothers need a place to sit."

They quickly comply and soon, the doors are closed and we're all sitting around the table. Slamming the gavel down, I holler, "Shut the fuck up, we've got shit to discuss!" As the murmurings cease, I focus on Murder and ask, "Brother, what brings you this far south? Everything alright?"

"Actually, no, it's not," Murder replies, "but I think your IT guy knows why we're here."

Hawg? What the fuck is going on right now? I feel like I was dropped in an episode of that show Rayleigh enjoys, *Stranger Things*, where nothing is as it seems and every other second, something weird is going on.

"Hawg?" I query, not liking the fact that I'm left swinging in the dark.

Hawg glances at both Murder and me before he focuses on his laptop screen.

“Brick, gotta say, I didn’t see them showing up quite yet, but they’ve been dealing with some shit, and it involves four fuckers who are apparently the reincarnated Devil Demons MC, who now call themselves the Devil Demon Deuces MC. The sons of the men we took out all those years ago are trying to make a name for themselves in the underground drug trafficking ring. They’re into meth, as in cooking and distributing it, and plan to use the money to ‘take down those fucking Raiders’ but as you know, we’re Bastards now. Anyhow, looks like they’ve been using Murder’s established pipeline that their club uses to move their product.”

“Fuck,” I roar out. “We got some names to trace, right, Hawg? Because we’re not going to just sit around with our thumbs up our asses waiting on them to grow the balls to attack us. Not fucking happening.”

“Yeah, Pres,” Hawg answers. “Jason Hoggard, Jimmy Sanders, Jordan Weaver, and Henderson Timerson. Otherwise known as Hog, Sands, Beaver, and Clock.”

“What kind of fucking pussy names are those?” Brew asks, before bursting into laughter.

“They obviously named themselves, probably after taking a few hits off one of their pipes,” Kracken adds, causing the rest of us to join in the amusement.

Although... it’s not really funny.

We may not run drugs ourselves, but some of our brothers in other chapters do, mostly weed and maybe some pills, but fucking meth? No, none of us wanna deal with that brand of poison.

“We came to help get rid of the fuckers,” Murder rumbles out. “We’ve spent years developing our routes, so we catch no LEO attention and those motherfucking idiots, who apparently enjoy their own shit, are gonna fuck it up. Plus, they seem to be intent on taking your club on. Don’t they realize y’all have a brotherhood behind you that spans *continents*?”

“Well, guess that explains why y’all are here then,” I reply. “Hawg, what else do we know about them?”

CHAPTER FOUR

RAYLEIGH

Brick was gone for a long time the night before which gave me the time I needed to get a lot of his presents wrapped and placed under the tree. I've had them hidden in different spots all around the room, and actually used a few of the boxes I got in from the online place I order stuff for the kittens to hide them inside of until I could get them wrapped.

Sneaky, I know, but it worked... he never suspected a thing.

As I clean the bar this morning, I find myself singing along to the music Brew put on for me that's booming out from the surround sound system's speakers. Every day I find something else to love about the men of this club. They may think I'm silly for wanting to decorate every available space with something festive, but they haven't stopped me yet. In fact, I've got the twins with me again today, because once I'm done, I'm going shopping with Cassie to finish things up and for some reason, Brick has decided I need protection.

"Do you know who all those men were that I saw at breakfast?" I ask Brew as I stack the clean glasses in the cooler now that the bar dishwasher is done. He's standing behind the bar doing his inventory or something on a tablet.

"Some brothers from Charleston," he replies.

"South Carolina?"

"No, West Virginia, Ray."

"Why would they come here though?"

“Club business.”

Gah, I am beginning to hate that phrase.

Not like Brick uses it on me very often, thank goodness, but I’ve definitely heard it a numerous amount of time from the other men. Probably when they’re tired of me asking questions, but how will I learn stuff I don’t know about if I don’t do that?

“I understand, Brew. I’m sorry I’m such a pain,” I quietly reply.

From under my lashes, I can see his frown as my words penetrate whatever it was he was thinking about. “Rayleigh, it’s not like that,” he starts.

“No, no, I get it, I ask far too many questions. I’ll be more mindful from now on.”

Inside I’m giggling because now he looks distressed at the thought that I’m upset.

“Babe, it really is club business this time, I promise. You can check with Brick if you don’t believe me. Why do you think you’ve got the twins with you today when you really haven’t had the need to have anyone following your every move?”

My blood freezes and I ask, “Am I in danger?”

I honestly don’t think I could survive if I was taken from my home again. Not after knowing freedom, finding Brick, becoming who I was always meant to be. No, if I ever get captured... *again*, I’ll fight back with every ounce of strength I possess within me. Nothing and no one will keep me from my man and my four-legged babies.

He makes a scoffing noise while shaking his head. “Babe, you’re the ol’ lady of the president, pretty sure if anyone comes after you, they’ll be filled with so much lead, they won’t need to be embalmed because all their bodily fluids will leak right outta them.”

“Well, that’s not a pleasant picture, Brew!” I exclaim, shuddering, causing him to laugh so hard he’s doubled over.

“I keep forgetting you might be the club princess, but you weren’t raised

around all of us, so you've got more delicate sensibilities."

"How the hell do you even know what that means?" I ask in astonishment.

"Ray, one of the things the old-timers insisted on is that those of us coming up in the club *had* to get our education. Some of us even did a short stint in the military, just the basic enlistment, of course, but they wanted more for us than they struggled to have. And because I enjoy reading, my vocabulary is a lot more advanced than your average bear."

I can't help the snicker that falls from my lips. "Y'all are all so different than I imagined."

"We're just flesh and blood men, Rayleigh."

"Who ride motorcycles, beat the hell out of those who hurt those who are more fragile and less fortunate, incite fear in bullies and thugs. Yeah, nothing normal about that at all," I taunt in a teasing manner.

"We take care of what's ours, princess. Always have, and we always will, no holds barred. The difference now is that we're part of something far bigger, so we've got more muscle behind us than we ever did before. Nothing and no one will fuck with us, and God help them if *anyone* tries to fuck with you. Brick will burn the country down one town at a time if that happens."

"I'm perfectly safe and fine, Brew. See? Right here, no danger lurking around the corner," I announce, doing a pirouette then a bow.

"Smartass," a new voice says. Turning, I see my brother standing there, grinning at my antics.

Without much thought, I throw myself into his outstretched arms, hugging him tightly. I've had a little bit of time to get used to the fact I have a brother now, and since he's found out, he's been really sweet toward me. I get the impression from the way the other men have reacted that how he's been with me isn't his normal personality, but I don't care.

"What are you doing here, Banshee? Not that I'm not glad to see you because I am, I just wasn't expecting it is all," I say, rambling so much, I barely take in a breath.

“Thought you might want to see the house,” he replies, smiling down at me.

“The house?” I query.

“Where we all lived when you were little. Brick’s gonna meet us there because I found some old recorded family movies.”

“Movies?” I feel like a parrot right now, repeating one or two words after each of his pronouncements, but I can’t help myself.

I’m dumbfounded and a little flabbergasted.

The thought that I can see where my family lived, where *I* lived before I was snatched, is mind-blowing. Then to know there are movies I can watch so I can see my parents and hear their voices? I don’t know what to say. On one hand, I wanna dance and shimmy in place. On the other hand, I wanna curl up into a ball and cry into my pillow.

I’m conflicted, yet excited... it’s a conundrum of mixed emotions flowing through me.

“If you want, that is.” His voice is cautious right now and I’m sure everything I’ve been thinking is showing on my expression, I’ve never really been one who’s able to hide how I’m feeling.

“I do but won’t it be difficult for you?” I ask, completely forgetting my earlier excitement about shopping with Cassie.

“The brothers have kept the house up through the years and since I’ve become an adult, I occasionally stay there. Not often because of the circumstances, but it won’t be hard on me, squirt, I promise.”

“Squirt?”

He chuckles then, his face losing its tightness. “Yeah, I always called you either RyRy or Squirt.”

“I’ve... I don’t know what to say,” I quietly murmur. “I’ve never had a nickname before coming here.”

“Well, get used to it, sis, because I heard Brew calling you princess and I know Brick calls you Sprite sometimes. I suspect you’re going to have quite

a few of them from this point moving forward.”

BRICK

As I pull up to Banshee’s house, I see his bike parked in front on the stoned driveway and know he’s already there with Rayleigh.

While I’d normally object to her being on the back of someone else’s bike, he’s her brother, and there’s nobody else I trust to care for her the way I do than him. Gathering the bags of takeout food from the local diner out of my saddlebags, I make my way up to the screen door that covers the front porch.

The house itself is a cozy, two-story Victorian, complete with a deep wraparound porch. The front part of it is enclosed and I have vague memories of Lorelei and some of the other ol’ ladies sitting on the porch in rockers, watching the kids play out in the front yard while talking, and drinking lemonade.

Although, looking back at how loud they were, it was probably spiked lemonade, which has me grinning as I head inside the house.

I immediately spot Banshee, standing there with his hands shoved into the depths of his pockets while Rayleigh meanders around the room, lightly touching old photographs as she absorbs just how much her family loved and adored her.

The wall she’s standing at is covered with hundreds of pictures, some of them professionally done, others just snapshots taken by various club members. From their first meeting to the ceremony where Lorelei accepted Bonzai’s claim, then their wedding followed by the announcement and arrival of Banshee. Then, Lorelei’s pregnancy with Rayleigh plays out in chronologically ordered pictures, with the first one being of her and Bonzai; he’s clutching her high in the air in one arm while waving the pregnancy test, both of them with smiles so wide it makes my own cheeks ache.

Pictures of Ban touching his mother’s expanding stomach, reading to it, kissing it; my ol’ lady lovingly touches and caresses them all, as tears silently streak down her blotchy cheeks. She continues on, now seeing when she’s actually part of the family, the looks of adoration on her parents’ faces as

well as her brothers, causing her to sob.

Unable to handle her distress a second longer, I thrust the food toward Banshee, uncaring if he drops it or not, then stride toward her before I pull her against my chest and wrap my arms around her. “Shhhh, I’m here, sweetheart,” I croon.

“This... this is what I always dreamed of having, Brick,” she stammers, her eyes still roaming over the photographs. “And I had it, too. Loving parents, a big brother. A huge extended family.” She points to the next section of pictures where she’s being held by various club members. “You even carried me around!” she exclaims, looking back at me.

“Yeah, sweetheart. Me and Ban were your protectors. We were emulating the brothers and how protective they were with their families, trying to be like our dads,” I quietly reply, chuckling at the memory.

I move with her as she continues to examine each and every one of the celluloid memories, embedding them into her memory. Right now, I’m grateful as fuck that Lorelei was the type of mom and woman who liked to document memories with pictures and mementos because even though Rayleigh doesn’t actually remember any of this time in her life, she can see it *did* happen and hopefully, it’ll continue to heal the heartache of the past for her.

“You want to eat while we watch some of the home movies?” Ban asks once we’ve made our way to the end of the wall. Sadly, there weren’t a lot of pictures taken after that fateful day. Partially because Lorelei threw herself into making flyers and plastering them everywhere in an effort to find information about Rayleigh, but also the fact is Bonzai and Lorelei were gone mere months later.

“Yeah, I think I’d like that,” she agrees. “I’m... I know I want to see more of the house, too, but maybe I’ll wait on taking that tour because I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed right now.”

“It’s not going anywhere, sweetheart,” I tell her. “You can wait to see the movies too, if you need to.”

“No, I want to see them. I feel like I need to for some reason,” she insists.

“Then that’s what we’ll do, we’ll watch some movies,” I say, caving in and giving her what she needs, what she wants.

I’ll always do what’s best for her within reason.

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CHAPTER FIVE

RAYLEIGH

“You two really did watch over me, didn’t you?” I murmur as I watch myself on the screen crawling on the floor, two little boys following along behind me.

“It was our job,” Banshee fiercely stresses, his tone serious and unquestionable. “I screwed up, though.”

Reaching over, I grab his hand and squeeze. “No, you didn’t, Ban. You were no match for a grown adult who coldcocked you. Please stop feeling guilty for something that was out of your control.”

“If I had ordered one of the younger kids to get help instead of shooin’ them inside without any directive, it might have saved you sooner,” he cries out, his pain palpable.

“Or you could’ve gotten more people hurt or killed,” I return. “You have no clue if he had a gun, you really didn’t know if there was anyone else hiding in the vehicle he came in, so you did what y’all were trained to do, right?”

“She’s right, Ban. Our dads always impressed upon us to send the little kids inside if we felt there was an immediate threat to their safety of some kind. You did what you were schooled and were told you were *supposed* to do in that exact set of circumstances.”

“And in the meantime, my own sister was kidnapped.” His tone is self-deprecating and my heart cries at the pain I hear.

“I survived, Banshee. I fucking survived,” I remind him. “Thanks to y’all joining in with the Royal Bastards, there were brothers who came to help find me and also heal me and my wounds. I was beaten and left for dead, yes, but they never did anything worse and for that, I’m more grateful because that might have shattered me forever. Please forgive yourself because as far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing I have to forgive you for. The only ones to blame are the ones who were behind the plot to take me to begin with, as well as my fake parents. They’ll never earn my forgiveness, but it’s okay because I’ve got it on good authority that they’re burning in Hell while paying for their earthly misdeeds.”

Rael made sure to tell me how each of the three suffered; Laura, Dave, and Enoch found their end reward screaming after being tortured for what they’d done to me. Brick wasn’t happy about me being told, but as Rael explained to him without any remorse, I deserved to know since I was the one who’d suffered at their hands, so he finally relented and let go of his resentment.

He finally nods and unpauses the screen, hitting the play button once again. This time, I watch while everyone is cheering as I pull myself up then unsteadily toddle. Straight into Brick’s legs. He scoops me up and I watch as my younger self pats his cheeks and says, “Mine. Brick mine.”

Brick’s phone rings and I see him stiffen when he catches the name on the caller ID. He answers it then immediately hands it over to me.

“Hello?” I answer.

“Child, it’s Madame Laveaux. You’ve always been his and he’s always been yours. The Fates decided that long ago. Do you see it now?” she asks.

I don’t know how she does what she does; it’s kind of spooky.

“Yes, ma’am, I do.”

“You’ve been worried for no reason. It’s not good for the baby.” With that she hangs up.

Baby? What baby? Did she just imply—? Surely not... I’d know, wouldn’t I? Besides, I’m on birth control so how would it even be possible?

My eyes are huge as they look up at Brick. I’m positive he must have heard

her because I'm practically sitting in his lap while we watch the movies.

"Brick? Did I hear her say what I think she just did?"

"What? What who said? Who was it?" Banshee questions, his hackles raised.

"Madame Laveaux," Brick responds, not taking his gaze away from me. "Seems my ol' lady has been concerned she wasn't good enough or something to be mine, which Madame Laveaux says isn't good for the baby."

"Baby?" Ban whispers.

"Apparently so. Okay, so we're gonna take off, keep that under your hat, brother, while we go grab some tests to confirm what she's just imparted on us, although it's merely a formality at this point because she doesn't make mistakes such as this."

I'm still in complete and utter shock as Brick hustles me out of the house with barely a goodbye tossed over my shoulder toward my brother. Then before I know it, I'm on the back of *his* bike and we're headed into town and the pharmacy. Although, he's going much slower than he ever has in the past which has me secretly smiling into his back. His protectiveness knows no bounds and I love it.

BRICK

As I pace outside the bathroom door, my heart pounding a mile a minute, I can't help the worry that wants to creep into my mind. We've got this fucking threat from the Demon Devil Douches now and I'm not stupid enough to think they won't come after my woman to get to me. Only this time, there's more than one life at stake if Madame Laveaux's prediction is confirmed.

One tiny stick will change the outlook and course of our lives.

"Anything yet?" I call out while cradling both kittens in my arms. It's as though they sensed I was stressed because they both took running jumps onto my jeans then crawled up my legs like they were tree trunks until I picked them up and dug their sharp claws out of my flesh.

She giggles then sasses, "It says the results take three minutes to show up,

Brick, and it's been less than one. Patience, handsome."

Patience be damned.

I'm always patient.

With everyone and everything. Hell, until she came into my life, I was the epitome of what being in control meant. Since then, my life has been a bit topsy-turvy and a whirlwind of endless anxiety, but I have no desire to change a damn thing. I went from being alone and lonely, to having this feisty, sassy woman, as well as two fuzzy furbabies as she calls them.

Now, I might be adding a human baby, the first one born into the club since we patched over and became a branch of the Royal Bastards.

I send up a prayer to the universe that my pops will be around long enough to meet his grandchild, even if he won't necessarily remember. I wish there was some way to heal him, even just a little bit, because I find myself needing his direction just like I did when I was much younger and navigating my way into adulthood.

The door slowly opens, and I freeze in place. "Brick?" she questions, her eyes as wide as saucers, while she holds multiple tests in the palms of her hands.

"Sweetheart, did you take all of those?" I ask, unsticking myself and moving toward her, a smirk on my face.

"I wanted to be one hundred percent sure," she replies, sounding defensive. "What if one was defective or something?"

"Madame Laveaux isn't known for being wrong, babe."

"I know but we still had to check."

"And?" I leave that one word hanging. I can physically see the test results but want her to verbally say them out loud.

"We're gonna have a baby, Brick." Her voice is full of wonder tinged with a little bit of fear. "What do I know about being a mom?" Now she's muttering to herself, an endearing if somewhat unnerving habit she has, likely because of the sheer amount of time she was left alone with only herself for company.

Gently putting the kittens down, I reach for my woman, extracting the tests from her hands and subtly placing them back on the bathroom counter, then I crowd into her and wash our hands. Can't be too careful with germs and I was touching the cats and she did have the sticks with her pee on them in the clutch of her hands. "Let's wash our hands, shall we?"

She starts giggling when she realizes what I'm doing. "You're gonna be an overprotective ass about all of this, aren't you?"

"And you're gonna let me. Speaking of, what was the name of that self-cleaning litter box you wanted to get for Calvin and Hobbes? I'll get one ordered and the prospects can take over cleaning it because I remember reading somewhere once that pregnant women shouldn't mess with litter boxes. The odor and fumes are bad for both you and for the baby."

Now she's doubled over laughing as tears flow down her face. "Brick, you know women have been pregnant for thousands of years without any problems, right?"

"They weren't my ol' lady," I point out, pulling her into my arms now that our hands are reasonably germ-free. "I should probably get someone to check on coming out to the clubhouse, clean the ducts and shit so you aren't breathing in anything harmful like dust and debris. Oh, and I'll be sure to reiterate to the guys, so they know to smoke their cigarettes, cigars, and blunts outside from here on out. Can't be too safe."

"This is gonna be a long-ass pregnancy," she mutters, grinning up at me. "But I'm here for it."

"You better be, sweetheart," I growl out, taking her lips in mine. "Now, we've got a little time before I have Church again, what say we celebrate the good news?"



I leave my woman sated and lightly dozing as I shrug my cut on over my shoulders then head back down to the common area so I can grab a drink before Church. Due to the surprising news we received earlier I definitely

need to find those fuckers before they try anything stupid.

I spot Hawg walking out from his office area, laptop tucked under his armpit, and immediately holler out, “Church! Grab your drink of choice and move your asses!”

My pops looks at me and starts bitching. “Brick, you haven’t taken over the gavel yet, why are you acting the way you are? Keep in mind while you’re over here dishing out orders, you’re not the man in charge yet, son.”

“Pops, earlier you said you wanted to have church,” I tell him, thinking on my feet while crossing my fingers at the white lie I’m spewing right now so that he’ll think this is nothing more than a reminder.

“Fuck, totally forgot about that. Y’all get the lead out!” he bellows, his arm spinning in the air like he used to do when we were about to take off on a run. “Thanks, Brick. So much has been going on around here that it slipped my mind.”

“Not a problem, Pops,” I utter, keeping the quirk of my smile buried beneath the surface. It feels good to see signs of the old man when he has his days of clarity.

My brothers don’t miss a beat; hell, even Murder and his guys don’t say a word even though I see their mouths twitch with humor. They all grab their beers or drinks from the prospect behind the bar and head down the hall into Church. As everyone finds their seats, I notice Hawg is pulling down the overhead screen we use to project images whenever he’s got something to share that we all have to see. Usually, he just reads shit to us from his screen, so hopefully, it means he’s found where those fuckers are hiding.

The door finally closed, I grab my gavel and bang it on the table, calling out, “Shut the fuck up, we’ve got shit to discuss!” Once the room goes so completely silent you could hear a pin drop from one end of the table to the other, I continue. “Alright, looks like Hawg has some information to give us about those douche fuckers, but first, we’re adding a new rule.”

Brew grabs his ever-present tablet and opens it up to start taking notes on the meeting. “What’s that, Pres?” he queries once he’s on the site Hawg set up for our encrypted shit.

“Rayleigh’s expecting,” I start to say, only to have the room explode with cheers along with pounding on the table. Glancing at Banshee, I see his face is wreathed in a smile, something he doesn’t do very often.

I’ve noticed, though, even though he just found out about Rayleigh, Ban’s smiling and grinning more with each day that passes. I’m glad my best friend’s coming back to his former self, although I suspect he’s going to be just as overprotective toward her as I am when it comes to her pregnancy. He won’t take a chance of anything happening to her.

“Means a few things need to change around here, brothers,” I state, my tone serious. “We’ll get the prospects to add an overhang off the back porch and hell, even screen it in so y’all don’t freeze during the winter, but no more smoking being done out in the open. It’s not good for her or the baby. So, no blunts, cigs, or cigars in the common area or anywhere my ol’ lady might be. In here smoking should be okay since we’ve got it really well insulated and filtered. Banshee, I need you to get some of the brothers to check into what it’s gonna run for us to get the ducts in the clubhouse suctioned out and maybe check into adding an air purification system or something. You know, like they use at hospitals to ensure germs are removed and the rooms are sterilized?”

Phantom starts chuckling and soon, the rest of my brothers, even Murder and his crew, are practically in hysterics, doubled over, red-faced, and pounding their hands on the table or their chair. He waves his hands around his head several times while taking deep breaths before he finally stutters out, “P-p-pres, you think you’re gonna make it with your sanity intact until she delivers? Because the way I see it, she can’t be too far along and already you’re changing everything. What’s next? She won’t be able to work for me or Brew at the businesses?”

When Phantom refers to me as pres, Pops’ eyebrows draw up and he sends me a *‘what the fuck’* look that has me shaking my head, but I choose not to interrupt my brothers and play peacekeeper once we wrap things up.

“Come to think of it, should she be around those chemicals?” I mutter, completely ignoring Pops’ bemused look, tapping my fingers against the table as I think about how I can possibly even consider taking that newfound freedom away from my ol’ lady. She’s fought hard to get her GED, to build

some independence as she learned everything she needed to in order to actually survive in today's world.

“Brother, have your prospects do the heavy bullshit, check the cleaners she uses to make sure they're not harmful to pregnant women and replace them if they are, and let her keep doing her thing. She's pregnant, not ill, and from the little I know about her past, she's been working hard to build herself up,” Murder suggests once the rest of the room calms down. “Now, the no smoking thing, that's not a bad idea because this club as a whole is about living free and easy, but not everyone smokes these days and they've got just as much right not to smell the fumes or breathe it in as those who light up do. We can't take away their rights to enjoy their nicotine or weed fix.”

I see my pops start grinning before he reminisces, “We did that when Lorelei got pregnant the second time too, which woulda been with Ryleigh. All them reports were coming out during that time about how bad secondhand cigarette smoke was and shit, so whenever she was around us brothers, we had a no-smoking policy in the house. Some of the old-timers were pissed but the rest of the ol' ladies stuck up for her and banded together, even though she wasn't the one pushing the issue. Bonzai was, actually. Fuck, these women end up toting our balls around, don't they?”

Murder smirks before replying, “Yeah, but fuck, it's worth it, RiffRaff.”

“Yeah, it is.” Pops' smile that accompanies his words lets me know he's living in the days of his past.

Once again, I wish he were more with it because he'd fucking love being able to tell his grandson or daughter all the stories, and taking them fishing like he used to do with me and Ban when we were kids.

Pushing those maudlin thoughts to the side, I look at Hawg and ask, “Any update on the dead fuckers?”

“We know where they're cooking and packaging for distribution, so I think we should set up a plan to take them down while Murder's here since it impacts his chapter as well. Not sure where they hole up yet, though, brother, because from what I was able to deduce, no one actually lives there.”

A map pops up on the overhead and we all groan when we recognize the

area. Granted we're in the mountains, but where they're apparently brewing their poison is an area that's full of old hunting cabins.

"It's actually kind of perfect," I murmur looking at the map. "They aren't accessible to the general public per se, and the owner of those cabins is dead with no living family, so no one would necessarily go up there exploring."

"They probably stay close enough to keep an eye on things, but hell that shit will kill ya, so unless they've lost themselves to the addiction of the drug already, they're smart not to be there sleeping and breathing in the toxic air," Phantom retorts. "Fuck, I don't have a problem with folks doing weed, hell, even the occasional hit of blow if that's their gig, but I prefer to be in control of my mind and body. Not only that, but it's fucking poison, y'know?"

Nodding, I retort, "I hear ya, brother. Prefer the way we're making money, less likelihood of having the ATF hounding our asses or following our every move. Now, let's put together a plan of action to shut them down for good and see if we can find where they're hiding. The sooner they're shut down, the better I'll feel because with them gunning for us, me having an ol' lady now puts a huge target on her back and my unborn kid."

Murder and his men have some good ideas about how we can safely dismantle the meth lab, then drop an anonymous tip into the right ears so it can be disposed of without harming anyone nearby and we decide to head out first thing in the morning to search for the douches.

CHAPTER SIX

MADAME LAVEAUX

“Ogun, answer the phone,” I murmur, my anxiety ramping up. After waking from a restless night’s sleep, I’ve been checking the cards and what I’m seeing is concerning.

“Grandmé, I can’t talk, we’re on our way to Roanoke,” Ogun remarks when the call finally connects.

“You had a vision,” I state.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve got Angel and Venom riding with me.”

“Angel will be needed,” I whisper, the remnants of my own vision plus what I saw in the cards replaying in my mind.

“Yes.”

“You’re a good man, Ogun.”

“I am not, but for my family, my brothers, I will do whatever it takes,” he insists.

“Be safe.” With that, I disconnect the call and head into the kitchen to brew myself some tea.

GRIM

“Quit your bitching, Grim, if Lucifer says we go, we go,” Rael snarks as we

head toward Roanoke.

“Fucker, I know this, but we’ve got plenty of souls to reap here, why are we needed for those four specifically? I’m sure he’s got other Reapers out there somewhere, we can’t be the only ones,” I retort.

“Because they’re family to us, brother,” Shadow quietly states. “He might be a bastard and we’re definitely no saints, but even he can recognize the pureness of Brick’s woman, don’t you think? So, if he wants us to be there to eradicate the last of the threats against her, I’m down for it. Besides, I heard it was snowing so after we slay, we can sleigh.”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole,” I grumble as the inside of the truck reverberates in laughter. “I don’t mind going, I do mind him ordering us as if we don’t have our own shit to do plus the fact it’s fucking winter means we aren’t on our bikes, but in a fucking cage.”

“Like I said, we can sleigh after we slay,” Shadow maniacally teases.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

RAYLEIGH

“RiffRaff, you really should try to eat some more of your breakfast,” I plead. I’m concerned because he looks a little pale today. I make a mental note to talk to Brick about it because he could be coming down with something, especially if he’s not willing to eat.

For some reason, Brick left me with his dad and the two prospects, citing ‘club business’ and ever since, I’ve been trying to get the older man to eat. The man is in desperate need of some iron and calcium added to his diet. Hell, even the club girls are gone, picking up all the supplies we need to start baking and preparing stuff for our Christmas gathering.

“Told you, sweetheart, when I’m working, I don’t eat,” he replies. “I got my coffee so I’m good, don’t worry about a thing.” His coffee is dark and gritty, it’ll definitely put some hair on his chest. I internally snicker thinking back to the other day when Brick took a swallow of the pot Pops brewed and spit it out stating *‘that shit’s gonna add a few chest hairs’*.

“What are you doing?” Now, I’m curious. His nurse took the morning off to run some of her own errands since he’s been having some good, lucid days.

“With Brick away, it’s my job to watch over you. The prospects are outside checking the perimeter right now. We gotta keep you safe, sweetheart. You’re carrying the next generation of the club.”

I think he’s slipped into the past once more, so to humor him, I merely nod and smile. “Okay, RiffRaff. I appreciate you taking such good care of me while Brick’s out taking care of business. I’m going to clean the kitchen, tidy

things up, and get stuff ready for when the girls come back so we can start baking. You going to be okay out here?”

I'm kind of excited, because once we're done baking, I'm supposed to go shopping with Cassie. This time, instead of trying to surprise her since that didn't work at all, I actually texted her and made a plan. Of course, I don't feel bad about not going the other day because I sat between my brother and my ol' man and was able to see the home movies and checked out all the pictures which helped me realize just how wanted, treasured, and loved I was when I was a little girl.

“Go do what you gotta do, girl,” he gruffly replies. “I've got this just fine.”

With a nod of my head, I go into the kitchen and start pulling out the cookie sheets to do the prep work on. I read in a magazine where the easiest way to keep things organized was to put all the items needed on a cookie sheet, along with the recipe itself. Once I have them lined up on the huge island, I turn on some Christmas music then begin gathering what I can. I know the club girls are getting the rest of the items, but I can make sure the butter is out and softening, plus measure out the flour and sugar until I run out.

As I hum along to the songs, I think about one of the gifts I'm working on for Brick. I found a website where I could upload all the pictures that've been taken of us together and have created a photo album for him. I also have a fuzzy throw coming for me that has pictures of Calvin and Hobbes all over them. Seeing the pictures my mom did, I'm using that for inspiration and will keep adding pictures to showcase us as well as my pregnancy. I did make a throw for him, however. It's got the club's logo on the top along with a picture of his bike and the phrase 'Brick's House' written in italics at the bottom.

“I should probably check to see when they're supposed to ship,” I murmur as I pull down the sprinkles for the sugar cookies now that everything has been measured.

I'm rather astonished that we have the sheer number of mixing bowls we do, but then it dawns on me that the club's size has probably ebbed and flowed through the years, and they would've needed a lot in order to make plenty of food for everyone, especially seeing as most of these men have large

appetites and can put away copious amounts of grub.

Whatever the reason, we have enough to suit our needs.

Glancing at the clock, I see it's closing in on lunchtime so wash my hands then put together enough sandwiches for me, RiffRaff, and the two prospects who're acting as our guards. Placing them on a meal tray, I carry them out to the common room and over to where RiffRaff is sitting, his eyes glued to the door.

"Brought out some lunch, will you sit and eat with me, please, keep me company so I'm not eating alone?" I ask.

I've found with him that if I make it about me and my comforts, he's more inclined to say yes than no, which is exactly what he does.

"Why are there so many?" he questions, grabbing one off the top and placing it on the paper towel I brought out for us to use in place of plates.

"Figured Jaydn and Haydn would want to eat with us as well," I reply, taking a bite of one of the cut-up sandwiches.

"Who?"

"The prospects." I forget that for these men, prospects are nameless until they've patched into the club and earned their road name.

"Ah, well, they'll eat when we're done, missy. That's how it's done around here," he states, proudly letting me know the order of things.

"Oh, okay." I don't necessarily agree with it, but I'm not one to buck against the rules either.

A sudden screeching noise from outside the door has RiffRaff tossing his sandwich onto the table while motioning for me to get behind his wheelchair so he can protect me from whatever chaos is ensuing out there.

The door bursts open and four scrawny men storm across the threshold, their body odor wafting before them and causing me to gag as the stench of their neglected hygiene hits my sensitive nose.

"Who the fuck are you?" RiffRaff bellows.

“We’re the Demon Devil Deuces MC, old man. Give us the girl and we’ll get out of your hair and leave you in one piece,” the one with the greasiest hair sneers through yellow, rotted teeth.

These men need to be educated on what soap, water, deodorant, and a toothbrush are used for because they are rank.

Peering around from behind RiffRaff’s chair, where I crouched down at his insistence, I see the four men are wearing cuts with their names monogrammed on the front, just like Brick and his brothers, only their names are weird; Hog, Clock, Beaver, Sands. What kind of names are those? At least with this club, their road names make sense most of the time. Or they do once I’m told the story behind them, that is. I have a feeling these guys named themselves.

I hear a click and watch in horror as RiffRaff pulls out a huge gun and points it at the four men, who start laughing maniacally as they pull out their own weapons. I know for a fact RiffRaff’s has no bullets in it because Brick double checks it every single morning before the old man wakes up to make sure no one gave him any ammo. I’m pretty sure the four junkies’ guns are locked and loaded and right now, they’re pointed at the center of RiffRaff’s forehead.

“Drop it, old man, give us the girl, and we won’t hurt you,” the one called Beaver says.

“RiffRaff, just let me go with them, you can tell Brick when he gets back,” I hurriedly whisper, unwilling for him to be shot trying to protect me with an empty gun of his own.

“Absofuckinlutely not!” he bellows. “Where are the fucking prospects? Y’all should’ve never gotten in here to begin with. Fucking pussies ain’t patching in to my club, that’s for fucking sure,” he growls out.

“Oh, those two are taking a bit of a nap right now,” Hog sneers. “Just a little tap against the head and poof, they went down like lead.”

Terror has me shaking; I know from the years living with Laura and Dave that these four are high which makes them extremely unpredictable. With no one else around, it’s up to me to keep RiffRaff safe while praying the two

prospects are just knocked out, not actually dead.

“RiffRaff, please,” I whisper-yell. “I’d never forgive myself if you got hurt protecting me. They’re harmless, I can get away from them.”

He turns to look at where I’m still crouched and shakes his head. “Sweetheart, you belong to my son which means you’re my family too. Don’t think I don’t know how much you’ve already done for this club. I may not have all my mind most days, but I’ve been paying attention. Banshee smiles again, my son doesn’t look quite as serious. It’s because of you. There’s no fucking way these douches are getting their hands on you. You’ve suffered enough because of others. Not fucking happening.”

Before I can respond, he turns and levels his gun at the one in the middle and pulls the trigger.

Nothing.

No loud report, no bullet flying through the air, no body dropping to the ground.

When the four men realize his gun is empty, they rush the table, pistol-whipping him until he falls out of his chair and onto the floor then they grab me.

My last glimpse of RiffRaff shows blood pouring in rivulets from his head.



I wake up dazed and confused, not knowing where I’m at, just that I’ve got a horrible headache that’s pounding at my temples, and I’m currently tied to a chair.

The space itself isn’t very big, with everything laid out in the open. The room is dusty as hell, which has me coughing when I attempt to inhale a deep breath.

My side hurts too, probably from where Hog kicked me when I managed to break away and attempted to run. That’s how I wound up unconscious;

apparently, these jerk faces don't care about the old saying of you shouldn't hit women.

But I gave as good as I got until I was knocked unconscious, I think as a wicked smile crosses my face remembering how I drew some blood too. Hog's face has deep gashes on both cheeks where I dug my nails in when he tried to pick me up. Beaver has a black eye because I punched him as hard as I could, and Clock is limping because I kicked the hell out of him between his legs when he got too close to me. Sands isn't faring much better himself.

All good things came to an end though when they surrounded me, because then my focus was on nothing more than protecting my unborn child. As I curled into a fetal position, one hand protecting my stomach and the other my head, they descended with fists and feet. So, despite no mirrors being immediately seen, I know my flesh bears plenty of bumps and bruises.

"He's gonna kill y'all," I whisper-sing even though I'm all alone in this ramshackle place. A good strong wind would probably knock it down, much like the story of the big bad wolf. I know for a fact my ol' man is gonna destroy these assholes who dared to touch his woman aka me.

Yep, they're goners, plain and simple.

The irony isn't lost on me that I've become somewhat bloodthirsty since getting involved with Brick. Of course, I suspect a lot of that has to do with the fact my early childhood was fraught with abuse and terror, so now I'm perfectly fine with those who hurt others being destroyed.

The door flies open, slamming against the wall, and the four dead men walking stroll inside.

"Ah, the princess is awake," Sands sneers. "Not looking so pretty now though, is she boys?" he asks, the four of them now braying like jackasses.

"Yeah, neither are y'all," I retort through a snicker. "Hopefully Clock doesn't have a woman because she's never gonna find his dick again."

"You fucking cunt," he seethes, storming toward me. Beaver's hand stops him when it slams down onto his shoulder.

"Patience, we can't kill her. We're using her as bait to draw them in,

remember?”

“Do you really think you’re going to win against the Royal Bastards?” I ask, astonishment dripping from my tone. “You *have* heard of them, haven’t you? They’re everywhere.”

“Ain’t no Royal Bastards around here,” Hog confidently states. “Just a bunch of pussified Raiders.”

“You’ve obviously been enjoying your product too much, because the Raiders are now part of the Royal Bastards MC.”

I watch with vigorous glee as their faces all pale while their features appear to sink into their skulls. Suddenly, they have that sickly gray pallor which is even worse than what they looked like to begin with.

“That’s right. Y’all fucked up. Not only that but who do you think you hurt before we left? Yep, that would be Brick’s daddy. Do you really think he’s gonna show any mercy or leniency toward y’all when you hurt his father and his ol’ lady? Nope, I don’t think that’s happening for y’all. Sounds like a *very* unmerry Christmas to me.”

I can’t help myself, I start humming ‘Jingle Bells’ then burst into laughter when I hit the note for ‘sleigh’ because I suspect Brick and his brothers will use a different spelling and meaning of that particular word. It’s one of those words that can be translated for other purposes.

Slaying... sleighing.

Hmm, maybe my head was hit harder than I thought because right now, everything that comes across my mind is hysterically funny. I suspect, however, these four aren’t seeing the humor in anything I’ve said out loud because they’re freaking out.

“Shut up, bitch, let me think!” Hog screams, pulling at his nasty, greasy hair. “Fuck, what should we do?” he whines to the other three, who look like they wish the ground would open up and swallow them whole.

“Write out a Last Will and Testament,” I helpfully suggest. “Make peace with your Maker? Although, I suspect you’ll be going straight to Hell with no pit stops nor a chance at redemption whatsoever, but what do I know about

facing one's Judgement Day? I mean, I didn't create any universe or anything. Just going by what I've heard on the television over the years."

"Bitch, shut the fuck up," Beaver warns, coming close and waving a disgusting bandana around. "Otherwise, I'll shove this in your mouth."

Yeah, no. Nope. Nuh-uh.

There's no fucking way that stiff piece of fabric is coming anywhere near me or my mouth; I'd be forced to drink bleach or something to get rid of all the germs that've made that material its home. Instead of replying out loud, I glare at him while rolling my lips inward and clamping them between my teeth.

I'll bite his finger off before he gets the opportunity to gag me with that cesspool. The fact I'm willing to poison myself by putting my mouth near any part of his disgusting body says a lot about the condition of his bandana, that's for sure. Not sure even Clorox could get it disinfected at this point.

"Clock, you go check around their clubhouse and see if they even know she's gone yet. Maybe we can drop her off or something before anyone's the wiser."

I can't see that working, but hey, if it gets me home, I definitely won't complain about their idiocy. I figure by now, since I have no clue how long I was knocked out, there are bound to be more people milling around and that means the likelihood of them getting me there, dropping me off, and then leaving undetected is practically zilch to none.

"Got it, Hog. I'll be back shortly," Clock confidently states.

I roll my eyes at his bravado; it amazes and amuses me how those in the throes of a drug high think they're invincible.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BRICK

Despite our best efforts, we come up empty-handed which has me equal parts angry and pissed-off.

“We’ll find them, brother,” Ban assures me, patting my shoulder as we head back to the parked trucks.

So far, we’ve checked out five different and distinct areas where hunting cabins are known to be located, coming up empty each and every damn time. Well, kind of; we did find two where they’ve been cooking their product and storing it for distribution, so Hawg has anonymously sent pictures along with the coordinates to the ATF. That shit has to be destroyed carefully and while we’re not huge on law enforcement whatsoever, in this instance, I’m perfectly happy with them getting involved, bagging evidence, and destroying the product. Just as long as we get the motherfuckers and can deal with them in our own way, that is.

“Bet the clubhouse is smelling mighty good about now,” Brew muses, patting his belly. “I know she’s planning to make cookies, do you think she’ll let us taste test some?”

Despite the seriousness of our current task, I can’t help the chuckle that his excited words emit. “Brother, you know damn good and well if Rayleigh is cooking or baking, she’s gonna make sure there’s enough for all of us to try.”

“Then let’s head in that direction so we can refuel and warm the fuck up,” Phantom suggests, rubbing his cold hands together in an attempt to warm them up. “Hell, even Kracken looks cold, and that motherfucker never seems

to be bothered by the drop in temperatures.”

I glance at Kracken and smirk. In deference to the fact we’re out in thirty-degree weather with snow on the ground and more being forecasted, he has a hoodie on over his cut.

“You’re reaching, brother,” I tease Phantom. “But yeah, we’re heading back to the clubhouse. It’s getting too dark to see more than a foot in front of us and we all know how easy it is to miss shit back in this expansive area without that deterrent.”



Arriving at the clubhouse, I see absolute chaos going on.

There are several trucks with Iowa tags, as well as a few with Nevada tags.

“What the fuck is going on? Did you get any calls?” I ask Banshee as we both bail out of my truck and race inside, shoving people out of our way.

“No, brother, not at all,” he huffs as we continue to jog.

We come to a halting stop when we see Grim, Rael, Shadow, Voodoo, Venom, and Angel situated around the room in battle ready stances.

Angel looks pale as fuck and is unsteady on his feet as he walks toward me, Voodoo trailing right behind him.

I take a deep, cleansing breath because the one person I’m searching for and wanna see is noticeably absent. Then I take another one when I realize my father’s wheelchair is at his normal table but he’s not in it.

When I see the two prospects looking like they’ve been half beaten to death, I can’t hold the roar back any longer. “Someone start talking now and tell me what the fuck happened while we were gone!”

Grim looks at Voodoo who returns the look. Finally, Voodoo says, “We were headed here because I had a vision concerning your ol’ lady and your father. While enroute, my grandmother called to tell me we were needed here

because she had one as well. When we arrived, we found your two prospects down for the count, as well as your dad.”

“Where’s Rayleigh?” My voice is quiet yet menacing.

Not that my father and the prospects aren’t important, but she’s number one and I didn’t hear her name cross his lips when he was informing us of what happened while we were gone.

I’ll burn the fucking clubhouse to the ground to find her and that’s just for starters.

“We don’t know, brother, she wasn’t here when we came in and found all of this havoc,” Venom admits. “Since we could do something to help your prospects and your dad, that’s what we focused on. Your old man is in one of the rooms resting now.”

Grim picks up the story. “We were told by Lucifer to come, that there were four souls who needed reaping. When we showed up and walked in, your prospects were awake but unfortunately, they don’t remember a whole lot. Seems while RiffRaff had them patrolling, they were attacked from behind and knocked out, brother.”

“RiffRaff had them patrolling,” I murmur. “Of course, he did because he was in protection mode over Rayleigh, I bet. Gonna need to nip that in the bud, I think. Okay, has my father said anything yet?”

“When he regained consciousness, he was surprisingly alert and coherent,” Grim conveys. “He said four guys came in and wanted Rayleigh. He pulled his gun but when he shot at them and there were no bullets, when they realized he was no threat to them, they beat him to a pulp then took her. He gave some good descriptions of the fuckers, though, and our Reapers were able to catch and have memorized their scents so now that you guys are back, we want to go hunting and see if we can track them down.”

Angel finally manages to get my attention. “Uh, Brick? I healed RiffRaff, brother.”

“Thanks, brother, but he’s a tough old bird, he’d have been fine.”

“No, brother, you don’t understand. I *healed* him. Maybe not to one hundred

percent, but a lot of what he's been dealing with, health wise, won't be an issue anymore."

"He has his memories?" I whisper the question, stunned. "Brother, he's been more lucid since I moved him here with his nurse, but even still, he's not always with it if that makes sense."

"Thinking you're gonna find that's changed, brother," Venom advises, grinning.

"I don't even know what to say right now. I'm grateful, of course, but with my ol' lady now missing, it's not as important. Grim, you said you and your Reapers should be able to scent these motherfuckers and trace them?"

Rael answers, a sinister smirk crossing his face. "Oh yeah, Brick. Those assholes won't be able to find a mountain big enough to protect and hide them."

"Do you want us to ride with them and bring them back here?" Murder questions, having stood by mine and Ban's side listening to everything. "That way, y'all can check on your father, grab some food and warm up."

"Appreciate it, brother," I reply.

Even though standing to the wayside isn't my thing, in this case, I'm about to drop dead on my feet and won't be good to anyone if I rode out with them. I'm torn between being part of the rescue team and taking care of myself, my pops, the rest of my men, and making sure our perimeter is once again impenetrable.

A dream from last night wafts through my head. Wrecker visited me while I was sleeping, insisting that when my brothers offered to go in search of my missing piece, in this case I'm thinking that means Rayleigh, I sit back or it could have dire consequences.

I'm not spiritual by any stretch of the imagination, but I've learned that when one of my brothers who have been touched by the other side suggests something, it's in my best interest to listen to their advice and follow it to the letter.

So, because of that, I'm giving my other brothers my trust. Implicitly,

without hesitation.

“Bring her home, brothers. And I wouldn’t be opposed to you bringing the four Douches back scathed if you catch my drift.”

“We’re family now, Brick. It’s what we do. Grim, we’ll follow y’all. I know Brick wants these fuckers brought back here so they can enact some pain, y’all good with that?” Murder questions as he heads toward the door.

Right now, my priorities are warring with one another, but when Ban lightly shoves me toward a table where Layce is placing bowls of hot soup and some of Leathyr’s bread, I decide getting some grub into me is important. Then, I’ll check on my pops and the prospects while I wait for my ol’ lady to be returned to my arms.

RAYLEIGH

I’m unsure how, but I doze off still sitting upright in the chair.

While Clock’s been gone, the other three have been outside, murmuring about what they plan to do and how they’re going to get out of the mess they’re presently in.

I wake up to a familiar yet scary face grinning at me with mirth dancing behind his eyes. “Hello, Rael, what are you doing here?” I quietly ask as the huge, scary-as-hell biker quickly works to untie me.

“Heard you were in a spot of trouble, Rayleigh, so we’re here to take you back to your ol’ man, how’s that?” he replies, before scooping me up and carrying me outside. When he catches me anxiously looking around, he says, “We’ve already got them tied up and in another vehicle with Murder and his guys ready to take back to the clubhouse so your ol’ man can deal with them. You’re safe now, princess.”

“Why isn’t she scared of you?” Shadow asks Rael. “I mean, we’re scary-ass motherfuckers, especially when our Reapers are riding us, yet she’s like the old ladies at home, she acts as if nothing’s different.” Turning toward me, he states, “Why, Rayleigh?”

Once I’m settled into a warmed-up truck and everyone is inside, I inhale

deeply then release all my pent-up emotion before answering. “When I was growing up, I lived with real-life monsters. They looked normal on the outside, but they were evil down to their very core. So were their friends who came and went from our house. I guess, even with the abilities y’all have, I instinctively know you don’t hurt the innocent, just the evildoers, so I’m no longer afraid? I don’t know how to answer that, Shadow. I mean, if I was in a dark alley and one of you came up on me suddenly, I’d probably scream my head off, not gonna lie. But y’all have helped me before, so when I recognized Rael, I wasn’t afraid.”

“Makes sense to me,” Rael replies as he navigates the truck toward what I’m hoping is Brick and our home.

“C-can I ask if you know how RiffRaff is?” I don’t mean to stutter, but my concern for Brick’s father is all-encompassing; it surpasses the fact I’m worried about my baby and whether or not the beating I took has hurt her or not.

No, I have no clue if it’s a girl, but I suspect the men in my life will go batshit crazy if they think I’m carrying a tiny female in my womb, so that’s how I’m referring to this new life I’m nurturing.

Gotta keep them all on their toes, otherwise, they’ll try to put me in bubble wrap and keep me insulated from the world.

“Voodoo and some of his men were there at the clubhouse when we got there, and they were taking care of him and the two downed prospects. I think all three are gonna be fine,” Rael says, grinning at me.

Okay, so his Reaper is still close to the surface because his grin was more like a grimace, complete with pointy teeth and shit. I swear, nightmares better not claim my sleep because I’m going to be pissed if they do. I know he’s trying to soothe me, which is why I just smile back.

“How is Brick?” I probe, missing the warmth of his arms that I’m wishing I were buried inside of now.

“Surprisingly, he didn’t lose his shit completely, but I suspect it was fucking close.”

“Why didn’t he come?” That’s the real question of the hour; I would’ve

thought he'd be leading the charge to find me.

Once again, Rael answers, with Shadow grunting his agreement. "Murder suggested that he and his guys tag along since all of them just returned from looking for these asshats. He figured your ol' man would want to check on his dad as well as the prospects. Since you belong to Brick and he's a Royal Bastard, you're family. Murder told him family helps whenever possible. Your man was ready to drop and when he found out you were taken, it was a major blow, Rayleigh."

"I was so scared," I admit, wanting to share my fear with these men so I can be calm for Brick.

"Give it to us, princess, we can handle it," Shadow decrees in a commanding, intense, sturdy tone.

"From before, I knew the four men who burst into the common room were high on something, but when they pulled their guns on RiffRaff, I thought they were going to kill him in front of me. Especially after he pulled the trigger on his own gun, which had no bullets. I mean, Brick checks it every single day because he knows his dad will want a gun on him, but because of his Alzheimer's there's no way any of the men want him having live ammunition, y'know? So, I tried to get him to let me go with them, but RiffRaff was adamant that wasn't happening. Unfortunately, when they realized his gun was empty, they rushed us and hurt him."

I feel a hesitant hand pat mine, giving me strength to continue. Doing a few breathing exercises, I calm my heart rate and center myself.

"I fought them, though," I proudly state. "Brew and Phantom taught me some self-defense moves when I first started working for the club businesses just in case a fight broke out in the bar. Although I'm not usually there when customers are, they felt it was important for me to know how to protect myself given how I grew up."

"Princess, you kicked ass," Shadow replies, a smirk lifting his upper lip. "Hell, that one guy's face looks like raw meat or something with all the gouges, and the other one has quite an impressive shiner. I'd say you learned those lessons well, and you should be proud of yourself right about now."

“I promised myself back when Brick found me half-dead that if I survived, no one was going to hurt me again if I could help it. I know I could’ve done more but they knocked me out, the jerks.”

“Well, their day of reckoning is upon them, trust me,” Rael haphazardly remarks, a sinister, dark tone in his voice that I choose to ignore.

“Yeah, thinking Brick’s not gonna be too happy when he sees how you’re bruised and banged up,” Shadow retorts, chuckling in such a way the hair on my arms stands up.

“He’ll be okay,” I reply, sounding far more confident than I really am right now.

I think he’s gonna lose his shit when he sees me.

“Why don’t you rest, we’ll be back before you know it,” Rael says, encouraging me to relax.

Despite the worry over what I’ll find at the clubhouse, the exhaustion pulls at me, and I find myself drifting into a light doze.

CHAPTER NINE

BRICK

Banshee and I are pacing outside the clubhouse since Murder called to tell me they were on their way back with Rayleigh in tow as well as the four hog-tied fuckers who took her.

“Want a hit?” Ban asks, lighting up a rolled blunt.

“No, no, I’m good,” I reply, my mind steadily racing as I worry about the condition she’s going to be in when they get back.

Murder was surprisingly mute when I asked him about that, so either he didn’t see her, or he’s worried I’ll lose my shit.

“You’re not, brother,” he insists. “Hell, even back when your dad got his initial diagnosis, you were calm, cool, and collected. You worked alongside him to make sure he had shit in place for the time he couldn’t make life-altering decisions, learned everything about running the club, and took it over *years* ahead of schedule, and did it with no problem. Yet you get an ol’ lady, who happens to be the long-lost and thought to be dead princess of the club, and your almost legendary calm and patience is shot to shit.”

I bark out a laugh at his assessment because he’s not too far off the mark.

“You just wait, Ban, when the woman who controls your soul comes into your life, you’ll see that everything you knew about who you were gets tossed by the wayside. Ever since I laid eyes on her in that fucking ditch, she’s had my attention. Even when I let her go out on her own in a manner of speaking, she was the first and last thing I thought about. Every. Single.

Fucking. Day. Add in the fact she's now carrying our child and yeah, I'm a little bit unhinged. Sue me."

"Still can't believe Angel healed your dad," he murmurs, blowing his smoke upward.

He's such a health nut, he rarely indulges in anything stronger than a shot or two of whiskey, but much like me, since realizing Rayleigh is his sister, he's a bit discombobulated as well.

"No kidding," I huff out. When I went in to check on Pops, he was awake and even though he's still got a few lingering issues, his mind is nearly perfect. So much so, he remembered turning the club over to me when he got his diagnosis, then was able to detail a lot of shit I had no clue he'd noticed.

"At least he doesn't want to take the club back over," he muses with a hint of humor lacing his words.

"I think the guys are gonna miss him calling Church though," I jest. "Gotta say this too, I'm impressed as hell that no one ever pushed back whenever he would issue orders."

"You're kidding right? At the end of the day, he was and is still RiffRaff, and while he might not fuck folks up like he did when we were kids, his reputation precedes him and lives on, brother."

The laughter that bursts free has me doubling over, the stress from the past several hours pouring out as I think about all the times we witnessed my pops handing someone their ass when they'd do something stupid as fuck.

He never put up with a lot of shit, ran a tight ship actually, much like my grandfather before him did, and despite not really ever having an ol' lady around, he had a way with the ladies for sure.

"Yeah, I get that, brother, but even still, it's kind of impressive, y'know what I mean? He had those fuckers out shoveling snow for fuck's sake."

Banshee joins in with me as we remember how Pops ordered the men outside to shovel the snow that was coming down so hard in sheets it was pointless. Yet, they didn't bitch or complain, they just got up, put their winter gear on and got shovels then started working.

“They were frozen half to death when they came back in, and hell, when your pops asked how it looked, Kracken never missed a beat and told him the lot was clear as a baby’s freshly diapered ass.”

“Thank God he didn’t insist on checking it out, he’d have seen it was covered in three feet of snow, brother,” I manage to gasp out through the wheeze from laughing so hard.

I’m about to say something else when I see the gate opening with several trucks preparing to pull through. Taking off at a run, I don’t miss the sly grins from my brothers who are driving as I finally figure out which truck Rayleigh’s seated in based on Rael’s almost maniacal look through the windshield.

Before the truck is in park or shut off, I’m at the rear passenger door and have it opened. She’s sound asleep as I unbuckle her seatbelt then draw her into the crevice of my arms.

“Be careful, brother, think she’s got some cracked ribs,” Shadow warns when I cradle her close. “Not one hundred percent sure, of course, but we all noticed her favoring her side.”

“Hopefully, Angel has a little more healing power in him,” I mutter, already striding toward the clubhouse and our room. “If not, I know she’ll heal, but it’s gonna suck.”

“Brick, I’ll get these fuckers taken down into the wine cellar,” Ban calls out, laughter threaded in his voice.

“Yeah, yeah, y’all take care of that and I’ll be down shortly once I have her sorted.”

“Find out what she wants us to call her,” Ban insists. “It’s getting confusing in my head, brother.”

Like what she wants to be called is a top priority right now, for Christ’s sake.

Finally at our door, I somehow manage to open it without dropping her but when I try to close it behind me, I see Angel standing mid center of our room.

“Brother, I know you’re not back to yourself yet,” I tell him, gently placing

my woman on our bed. Her kittens immediately gravitate toward her, curling around her head and purring, happy that their mistress is home.

“Doesn’t matter, it’s one of the reasons why I’m here, Brick,” he insists. “Besides, Venom and Voodoo are on their way up and they’ll help me by giving me an energy boost.”

“Only if you’re sure, Angel, because you did more than I would’ve anticipated or expected seeing as I wasn’t planning on any of y’all being here,” I state, appreciation woven in my tone.

He chuckles then replies, “Yeah, had to throw you for a bit of a loop coming back with Murder and his guys to see all of us here, huh?”

“You have no fucking idea. Guess I should get used to it though.”

“Probably so, especially since Madame Laveaux has taken a special interest and liking to your ol’ lady. She’s now spiritually connected to her, so if you thought she was just going to go back to her normal shit, you’d be wrong.”

Voodoo’s mirthless laugh as he enters my suite has the hair at the nape of my neck standing straight out. “Grandmé does what she wants when she wants and trust me, she doesn’t give that first fuck we’re in a motorcycle club with our own shit to do or take care of. If she calls and says ‘go’, we roll out no questions asked.”

“She’s kind of scary.” Rayleigh’s voice permeates the room. “But I really like her a lot. And maybe I can ask her the next time she calls, but she might not know the answer to my question.”

“What’s that, Sprite?” I ask.

“After we watched the home movies, I remembered something from when I was in the ditch waiting to die.”

Growls now reverberate as we all remember the condition she was in the first time we found her. Somehow, I manage to tamp down the outward show of anger because those bastards are dead and burning in Hell as we speak, just like the fuckers who are trussed up in the wine cellar will be soon.

“What did you recall?” Venom’s voice is gentle but firm, far gentler than any

of us have ever heard it, but I know it's in deference to my ol' lady.

“Just before I passed out, a woman was singing to me. I heard her voice again when we watched the movies with Banshee, Brick. I think... I think it was my mother.” Her voice is barely above a whisper, a look of awe on her face. “How could that be possible?”

“I'm sure my grandmother would know for sure, but if you heard your mother, you were in that in-between place, a realm where you wait when you're close to death.”

I can't help the sound that emits from my mouth because I nearly lost her before she was ever truly mine. If not for Voodoo's grandmother... no, it doesn't bear thinking about.

“Really?” Rayleigh queries as she tries to prop herself up on her forearms. I go to help her only to have Angel, Venom, and Voodoo move in front of me and block me. The three of them manage to surround her with each touching a piece of her flesh as well as putting hands on Angel.

I can feel the sheer power now flowing throughout my room; it's almost like when I was a kid, and we did the static electricity experiment in earth science class. Every hair on my body is standing on end and there's a frisson of molecules that almost feels like an electrical current pinging and zapping all around us.

The entire space is electrified.

RAYLEIGH

I know I wasn't awake the first time Angel healed me, so right now, the sheer psychic energy coursing through me feels a bit strange. Well, that's the closest word I can think of, anyhow, because jeez, with every breath I inhale, the pain in my side lessens and I can almost feel my ribs healing and fusing back together. The taut skin over my cheekbone which was split, and is probably going to scar, suddenly eases, and the eye that was totally swollen shut is letting light in as the inflammation goes down.

As each man removes his hand from me, I feel lighter and lighter until it

dawns on me that I feel as if I've been energized. Like, if I was a runner, I'd want to run a marathon or something. My hand drifts down to my abdomen, which is still flat since I'm so newly pregnant, causing Angel to flash a full-blown grin my way.

"The baby is just fine, princess," he states. Turning to Brick, he continues. "She should be good now, brother. What say we let her clean up while we deal with those fuckers?"

I can tell Brick is torn so I urge, "Handsome, I'm good, I promise. I'll just grab a shower then go down and find something to eat."

"I'll get one of the prospects to bring you some food," he contends, standing firm.

"No, I want to check on your dad and also see how they're doing," I persist.

I can't let him start bossing me around like this so early on in the pregnancy or I'll never walk anywhere or do anything and that simply won't do, not at all.

"Brother, she's surrounded by Bastards, do you really think anything's gonna happen?" Voodoo questions.

"Fine, fine," he relents, leaning in and kissing me.

Then along with the other three, stomps like a herd of elephants out of our room. I can't help the smile that graces my face because his actions showed me he was beyond torn.

Having never been a first priority in anyone's life, I know there will be times when the club takes the lead simply because of his position and I'm totally okay with that fact. It's what I signed up for when I accepted his patch and claim.

But right now, knowing he wanted to stay with me even though he had shit to handle makes me all gooey inside.



Freshly showered, I giggle as the kittens frolic on the bathroom counter while I brush my teeth before moisturizing my face.

“Y’all are so silly,” I murmur when Hobbes swipes his paw underneath the running water. “You have your own fountain, remember?”

His little face tilts toward me as if to ask, ‘And?’ which has me chuckling while I finish getting myself together.

“Come on, babies, let’s get you some fresh water and food.”

At the mention of food, they jump down, which always gives me a bit of a heart attack since they’re still rather on the small side, but they sprint over to their placemat and wait for me to open up two cans of wet food. As they start eating, I place my dirty clothes in the hamper, rehang my damp towel so it’ll dry, then head into the closet to find something to wear.

Today is all about comfort.

Fresh underclothes now in place, I sort through my sweatpants until I find my favorite color then slip them on, along with a matching T-shirt and some fuzzy socks and my slippers. Glancing around the room, I pick up a few odds and ends to straighten it back to its normal, pristine appearance then head out to find some sustenance to feed my growling belly.

As I rummage in the kitchen’s massive refrigerator, I hear the whirring of RiffRaff’s wheelchair. Spinning around, I can’t help the smile that crosses my face when I see him motoring toward me.

“There’s my girl,” he says, stopping once he’s next to me. He pulls me down onto his lap and gives me a huge, fatherly hug. “Now, let’s talk, little missy. You will never again put yourself in danger for me or any other man in this club. That’s our job, you understand?”

“RiffRaff, you shot them with a gun that had no bullets!” I exclaim.

“And who’s fault was that, missy? Not mine, as far as I knew I had slugs in my pistol,” Riffraff vehemently spits. “I should tan Brick’s ass for that stunt.” He harrumphs which has me placing the palm of my hand over my mouth to keep in the chuckle.

“Your son was concerned about you and didn’t want you acting without thinking about the ramifications,” I placate.

“My mind may have been a bit skewed, but I know who needs to be put down and who doesn’t,” he rants, crossing his arms across his chest and shooting lasers from his eyes, acting as if he could melt the floor with his angry stare. “And maybe if I’d have had bullets, I could’ve handled those pussies without you getting taken and hurt.”

“Who says I got hurt?” I question, since I know I look whole and hearty.

“Before I passed completely out, I saw them hit you, Rayleigh,” he informs me, his voice quiet yet firm. “They’re the kind of man who will hurt those of the weaker sex, as well as animals, without a fucking care in the world.”

“You’re right, they did,” I admit. “But guess what, RiffRaff? I got in a few of my own hits too!” I wiggle in excitement causing him to burst into laughter.

“Used some combat moves on them, huh?”

“Well, I made sure I had some of their DNA under my nails just in case things didn’t end up well for me,” I tease. “But I also ensured one would likely never reproduce again, and it’s possible the other one’s eye is permanently damaged. It’s a good thing I watch all of those true crime documentaries, they’ve taught me a thing or two about evidence and what’s needed to convict someone in a court of law.”

He snickers at how bloodthirsty I sound right now. “I see you’re fitting in well with our merry band of miscreants.”

“Was there ever any doubt? I mean, you knew my parents and Brick says you helped raise Ban once our parents died. So even if I wasn’t around, it’s kind of in my blood, right?” I ask.

“Not sure it works like that,” he replies, helping me up. “Now, can you fix an old man some of that soup I think Layce made a few days ago?”

I sigh in happiness at being needed, even for something so trivial and minor.

“That sounds good and since I was trying to find something to eat, I’m going to warm a bowl of soup up for me too.”

“Don’t forget the bread,” he advises. I can’t stop my giggle because I’ve noticed the man does love his carbs. “She always puts it in the breadbox in the pantry behind the cereal. Otherwise, those other assholes eat it all.”

“But you know her secret hiding spot?” I tease, pulling out the huge pot and placing it on the counter before I spoon up two heaping bowls. Once I have them in the microwave heating, I head into the pantry and come out with a loaf of Leathyr’s homemade bread.

His sly look then wink has me laughing outright as I state, “Ah, I see, you didn’t let on you were paying attention.”

“It pays for everyone to think you’ve lost most of your marbles. They forget to hold their thoughts and tongue around you because their thinking is you won’t remember what they said anyhow and not only that, if you do repeat it to someone, the likelihood of them believing it is next to none,” he sagely states, rolling over to the fridge and pulling out the butter. “We need one of those butter hut things.”

“What?”

“You know, they allow you to put butter in and keep it out on the counter so it’s not all cold and stiff. My nurse can tell you what they’re called because she’s always talking about how nice it is to be able to smoothly butter a piece of toast and have it soak in or some shit.”

“I’ll have to look for one of those,” I muse to myself.

The list of things I need to look for when Cassie and I can finally go out and shop is growing by leaps and bounds, that’s for sure.

“She used to watch all those fucking infomercials when we were still in that death house.”

“You mean the assisted living facility?”

“Yep, death house. People go there to die, Rayleigh.”

“Well, you’re not in danger of that any time soon, I hope,” I retort, placing a steaming bowl of soup in front of him, along with two thick slices of baked bread, before I grab my own. “Now, let’s eat and you can tell me some

stories of how Brick was when he was growing up in case I need ammunition against him.”

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CHAPTER TEN

BRICK

Watching Murder's guys at work interrogating the four douches is like watching poetry in motion, that's for sure. While me and my brothers will end them before Grim, Rael, and Shadow reap their rotting souls, I figured Murder needed first shot simply because they decided to fuck with his distribution routes.

"Thinking he's not got much more to say," I helpfully state, looking at the fucker formerly known as Clock, his yellow stained teeth now laying haphazardly around his feet as blood pours from his mouth. Not only that, but his tongue is half its size, Static getting pissed and slicing through it when Clock made the mistake of sticking it out, much like a child does when they're having a temper tantrum.

"Very true, the good news is, they're so fucking inept, they don't appear to have a lot of customers yet, so we can just tweak our route slightly and be back in business," Murder concurs, standing shoulder to shoulder with me.

"Well, you know if you ever need our help going through this area, you just have to ask, brother," I tell him. "We're working with Scorn now with regard to some new gun runs and shit so it's definitely not a hardship for us to assist."

"Will keep it in mind. Think your ol' lady will be up to coming up for the wedding in a few weeks? Y'all are close enough so even with the snow, it shouldn't be too bad of a trip," he asks. "If the fucker would've waited until Spring, we coulda had more of a showing of Bastards, but no, his ol' lady

wanted a holiday themed wedding, so it's been a challenge to get enough guests."

"Can always throw a party when it warms up, too, brother," I suggest. "I mean, we're all always up for a fucking party and road trip."

"True, true."

"Regardless, yeah, see no reason why we can't come on up. Need to start introducing her to others especially those with ol' ladies so she has someone to reach out to."

There's something to be said about being in charge simply because all four of us presidents are leaning against the wall as we watch our brothers work all four men over.

I know all four douches have pissed and shit themselves through the interrogation more than once because the stench is horrific and foul. But if I saw a man completely change into something else like Shadow and Rael did, I expect my bowels would explode as well.

"Ban, you sure each of the ones who touched my ol' lady has been dealt with yet?" I ask, amusement coating my tone. In addition to teeth, fingers now litter the floor since Banshee decided to amputate the digits of everyone who made the mistake of touching his little sister.

"Yeah, brother, they have. Too bad we're not cannibals because we could have deep fried fingers," he retorts, causing the four men to gag as we all cheerfully laugh.

"Y'know, she seems to have gotten in some good hits herself," Murder muses, looking over all four of the dead douches. "Whoever's been teaching her to protect herself did a good job."

"Brew and Phantom took it on themselves to give her some basic self-defense lessons since she was living on her own just in case she ever ran into a problem. She needs to know more, though," Banshee huffs out, kicking Clock in the ribs and knocking him sideways onto the floor. "Next!" he calls out, waving his hand to the other brothers waiting for their turn.

By the time everyone who wanted to get a few hits in does so, all four men

are clinging to life by the skin of their well... gums, I guess, since none have teeth left.

As I watch Grim, Rael, and Shadow all completely morph into their Reapers, complete with the ghostly scythes which will take the souls to Hell, I barely hold back my shudder. As one, the three men make a slicing motion across their own throats and the four douches' eyes widen when theirs split wide, spilling their lifeforce onto the floor.

Their black souls now begin to float transparently upward, only for the three Reapers to strike out with their scythes, slicing through them and causing the most hair-raising screams to echo around the room until a section of the floor opens. Heat transfers into the room from the flicking flames as the four bodies slip into the crevasse before the floor once again turns whole. There's nothing left as a reminder, not one tooth or finger, which makes cleanup a helluva lot easier.

"Y'all make cleaning up a breeze, brother," Banshee says once Grim has regained his normal visage.

"Right? One of the better things about this whole gig," Rael enthuses, his Reaper still present as he chuckles maniacally.

"You're a nutjob, brother," Shadow snarks.

"And you're not?" Rael returns. "Face it, we're all Bastards so it's not like we've got a straight shot into the Pearly Gates, brothers. But we can protect those out there who are pure and good, like our ol' ladies and Rayleigh. If that means I'm Lucifer's bitch, so be it. I'm good with my choice."

"Glad we've got you on our side, brothers," I advise all of them. "In all honesty, I think Jameson has done one helluva job building the Bastards into what they've become. We have brothers virtually everywhere and while we'll likely build closer relationships to those who are nearby, the fact we can pick up the phone and put the word out and have thousands of brothers at our back in a time of need is fucking phenomenal."

"Agreed. Now, let's all get cleaned up and see what your ol' lady has put together for us to eat, brother," Banshee says.

"Then since we've slayed, we can sleigh, right?" Rael asks, laughing when

Grim and Shadow smack him. “What? It’s snowed outside so they’ve got sleighs, right? You guys get it, don’t you?” he questions, looking at me and Banshee.

I shrug because at this point, nothing that comes out of any of their mouths surprises me.

“If you feel like you wanna go out sleighing, I’m sure the prospects can dig them up for y’all. The hills are steep enough, but count my ass out. I need more warm food, my ol’ lady wrapped in my arms, and about a decade worth of sleep.”



Dinner is a rousing success, with my ol’ lady, my pops, and the prospects appearing to be no worse for the wear. With the Devil Demon *Douches*, as Kracken couldn’t resist calling them, out of the picture, the beer and alcohol was flowing amongst the brothers while Pops regaled all of us with stories from the club’s past.

Now, I’m outside, freezing my *damn* balls off because my ol’ lady got all ‘super’ excited, her words not mine, when Rael said he and Shadow wanted to go sleighing.

Fuckers.

I heard them cackling like a bunch of teenage girls when they mentioned it right in front of her.

Troublemakers. Every damn one of ‘em.

“You’re showing remarkable restraint right now,” Grim says, standing alongside me as I watch the two assholes laughing their heads off, their Reapers on full display right now, as they chase each other down the huge hill not too far from the clubhouse. “I figured you’d have shot them at least when they pushed the issue and your ol’ lady wanted to do it too.”

“Aside from the fact I’ve already got a debt I’ll owe to Lucifer someday,

she's never had this, brother," I quietly admit. "Those bastards took her when she was too little to know about building snowmen, or going sledding. Hell, I know the clubhouse looks like the North Pole vomited all over the place, glitter, and that tinsel shit she's become obsessed with strewn everywhere, but she doesn't ever remember celebrating Christmas as a kid. At all. So, it's a small thing to stand out here freezing my nuts off to see her with *that* expression on her face."

We gaze over to where Rael is now pulling the sled back up the hill, Rayleigh holding on to the sides, her head tilted back as her laughter rings out, echoing. I notice every brother standing by watching has a smile tilted up on the corner of their lips while watching her as she has a good time. Shadow's hollering that it's his turn to pull the princess but Rael keeps the sleigh just out of his reach.

"Yeah, I can't say that I blame you one fucking bit. You know she's gonna push to go shopping with her friend tomorrow."

"Can't keep her hidden, Grim. The threat's gone. I'll send the prospects with her, or hell, maybe my pops. It would serve his ass right." We both chuckle then because like most men, my pops isn't against shopping, as long as it involves wheels, lead, leather, or chains. In short, a Harley Davidson showroom or barring that, the local truck dealership. "You know, maybe I'll put a bug in her ear that I wish I had a new wallet because then she'll ask him, and he'll offer to go. It's a win-win situation."

"Damn, Brick, you can't hold it against him forever, brother."

Like hell I can't! "The asshole told her I was scared of fucking heights." Which is one of the reasons why I'm not sledding with my ol' lady. "But he failed to tell her the reason behind it, which is why he's due some payback as far as I'm concerned."

"Well, spill it, why are you?" Grim questions.

"Because when we were what, eight or nine? We thought we were gonna be tough little shits, so we climbed onto the top of the shed's roof then tried to walk across the clothesline. We thought we were like those fucking assholes who would walk across tightropes over Niagara Falls and shit," Banshee states, walking up next to us. "Brick went out first and of course, the line

snapped, he fell about fifteen feet or so and busted up his leg and arm. Ended up having to have surgery and couldn't ride that whole summer."

"So, you've hated heights since then? Seems kinda harsh."

"Yeah, well, the ground coming up to meet me as I was flying down toward it isn't what I was looking forward to that particular day either, so there's that," I retort. "Took a shit ton of physical therapy to be able to walk right again and I came damn close to losing my arm when my stitches got infected."

Grim's about to say something else when Rayleigh comes running toward me, giggling over her shoulder at Rael and Shadow slipping and sliding as they try to keep up with her. "Help me, Brick! I'm frozen solid but these two want to keep sledding."

"Looks like I need to warm my ol' lady up now, brothers," I convey with a wiggle of my eyebrows, pulling her into my arms.

"Thanks for letting me go sleighing with y'all," she says over my shoulder as I turn and head back into the clubhouse, laughter ringing out around us.

RAYLEIGH

"I had fun tonight," I whisper against his throat, my voice slightly slurred with fatigue. "I can't wait to go shopping tomorrow with Cassie."

"What else do you possibly need to shop for, Sprite? There are a million presents under the tree in here, and at least half a dozen more than that downstairs for everyone else."

"I need to look for something called a butter hut."

"What the fuck is that?"

"Something your dad wants, handsome."

"Maybe he'll go with you then, because I know your brother needs a new wallet and he's partial to the ones they have at the Harley store in town."

I perk up a little, then say, "I'll ask him tomorrow morning at breakfast. When are your other club brothers going home?"

“Think they’re planning to take off at some point tomorrow since Christmas is just around the corner. They wanna get home to their own chapters and ol’ ladies.”

“Yeah, I’d hate it if you weren’t home with me too,” I murmur, nice and cozy in my after-sex happy place where the kitties purr around our heads and Brick’s holding me close. “I wonder how long before I’ll be able to feel the baby move.”

“Don’t know, but I need to find out from Pops’ nurse who will be the best doctor for you to use.”

“M’kay.”

I’m nearly asleep when he asks, “Rayleigh? Ban’s been on me for a bit now about what you want all of us to call you. Says it’s fucking with his head because he wants to call you Ry or RyRy like he did when we were kids, but you’ve been Rayleigh for as long as you can remember. I told him it was ultimately up to you.”

Unbidden, tears come to my eyes, thinking about the young boy who didn’t get to see his little sister grow up, and now doesn’t know what to call her. “Let me sleep on it tonight, so I can give you an answer in the morning, okay?”

“That’s fine, sweetheart. I love you, never forget that, okay?”

“Love you too.”



My sleep is full of nightmares as my heinous past merges with my beautiful present and much-anticipated future. Finally, to keep from waking Brick up, I ease out of bed then take a quick shower before I get dressed for the day. Since it’s so early and the sun hasn’t risen yet, I decide against going down to the common room, and instead, curl onto the couch by our tree, the soft lights as well as the fireplace lulling me into a sense of peace.

“Babe, you okay? It’s not the baby, is it?” His sleep-roughened voice caresses my senses, further enhancing my overall calm.

“I’m okay, Brick. Just couldn’t find any good, restful sleep so I got up because I didn’t want you to miss out on rest too.”

He comes over to the couch, lifts me up, settles down into the cushions, pulls me to him so that I’m sprawled across the top of his lap, then grabs the throw over the back and covers the two of us up.

“If you’re awake, then I want to be awake with you, sweetheart,” he whispers, softly kissing the top of my head. “What’s got you so troubled?”

“Last night you asked me what I wanted to be called, Rayleigh or Ryleigh. I guess that was in my head when I finally fell asleep because I had some pretty horrible nightmares, but I also had a few terrific dreams,” I start explaining, my hand stroking across his wide, expansive chest. I can feel the rumble against my palm and pat him a few times. “Rayleigh died in the ditch that day, Brick. From everything I’ve learned, Ryleigh was loved, cherished, and treasured by her family, so I think I’d rather be her from here on out since she never really got a chance to live.”

“Then Ryleigh it is, sweetheart. I’ll make sure it’s passed around too so folks get it right.”

“As long as you and our family here know what to call me, I’ll be fine.”

“No, no. Just like it’s a mark of respect for our road names to be used once we’ve been given them, it would be disrespectful for anyone who knows us or you to call you by your dead name and that’s what Rayleigh is from here on out, dead. Instead, the club’s princess, *Ryleigh*, is home, ready to reign over her kingdom at my side.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BRICK

“Son, you better be glad I fucking love you and don’t wanna answer to the brothers for taking you out,” my pops growls out once Ryleigh flounces upstairs to finish her abundance of wrapping.

All the brothers left for their respective chapters, bottles of good whiskey in their trucks in appreciation for their help, along with multiple tins of cookies that Ryleigh and the club girls baked. My ol’ lady even asked Murder what the wedding couple would like for their gift then jotted it down on her ever-present list.

“Not sure what you mean, Pops,” I reply nonchalantly, sipping at my beer while Kracken and Brew make faces at me behind his back. The rest of the brothers are all just sitting around, drinking a few cold ones, and enjoying the festive atmosphere, although I’m pretty sure they’re all dying to know what their stockings are currently holding, since my ol’ lady has been adding things every time she comes down with her hands full of wrapped gifts.

They’re all going to be spoiled, and right now, I can’t find it in me to give that first fuck. She’s having an absolute blast spending money, baking, decorating, and making lists of what she wants to do once the holidays are over. I’m not gonna stop her, that’s for damn sure.

He’s been bitching since they got back, although thankfully, not in front of my ol’ lady, because he fell for it, hook, line, and sinker, when she asked right after everyone took off if he could help her find a new wallet for Banshee since she didn’t know where the Harley store was at. With one

prospect driving, and his wheelchair strapped to the back, he didn't suspect a damn thing.

However, not only did they hit the Harley Davidson store, where according to him she dropped quite a bit of money, she also took him to an outlet mall where she dragged him through several stores on her quest to find a butter hut. Along the way, she found stuff for the kittens, me, the club girls, Pops' nurse, the brothers, and even her best friend. Hell, I know for a fact she found a few things for Pops as well.

"You knew damn good and well that girl was going to do some shopping, not just hit Harley!" he exclaims.

"Pops, did you have a good time with her?" I question, knowing damn good and well he did based on what the prospect already told me.

His head drops even as he nods. "You know I did. She's a witty little thing, ain't she?" he grumbles, tossing back a shot of whiskey. "Very observant about all kinds of shit."

"She doesn't remember her real dad, Pops. That means you gotta be there for her," I gently remind him. "You gotta be able to tell her their stories."

"I can do that, but I think I'm full up on shopping until about fifty years after I've died, son," he laments, causing the rest of the brothers to burst into peals of laughter.

"Gotta admit, she sure adds life to this fucking place," Phantom remarks. "We haven't had a dull moment since the night Voodoo walked in here and said we had to go find your ol' lady."

"Ain't that the fucking truth."

"Do you know what they're cooking for dinner tomorrow?" Brew asks, already patting his stomach. "Fuck, she can cook. So can her best friend, Cassie."

"Thinking they're doing a couple of hams with all the trimmings," I answer, vaguely recalling her talking over the menu with Leathyr last week.

"After the holidays, I'm gonna have to start exercising," Phantom confides

while snickering. “No sense doing it now, so close to the new year and all that shit.”

“Does she know about clubs? Ryleigh’s friend, that is,” Jingles inquires, a wistful look on his face.

“Why do you ask, brother?” I ask while glaring at him.

“Because she’s cute and intrigues me, Brick.”

“You ain’t messing with her best friend, Jingles,” I warn. “Especially not if you’re just looking for some fun or a one-time hook up. Cassie ain’t that kind of girl and I won’t have my ol’ lady upset or hurt if you fuck things up for her friend.”

He throws his hands up and replies, “It’s not like that, Brick, I swear. She kinda reminds me of a girl I grew up next to, back when I lived in Ohio, before my old man moved me to Roanoke, is all. I know she’s the kind of girl you don’t fuck around with, she’s the kind you wife up or in our case, claim as your ol’ lady.”

Sometimes, you do both, but I don’t say that out loud. While I’ve done the majority of my shopping online simply because of everything going on, Ryleigh has absolutely no clue how overboard I’ve gone because the club girls have been hiding everything away except for a few select packages which I have under our tree in our suite. Some others are under the big one in the common room.

Rapping my knuckles against the table, I stand and grab my empty bottle as I make my way over to the bar for another. “Prospect!” I call out, only to have him already handing a fresh one to me. “Y’all don’t destroy it too much down here. I know she’s planning on doing a brunch thing around eleven before she lets y’all see what you got for Christmas.”

I hear their groans but know every single brother will ensure it’s pristine down here so when she comes into the room, her vision of how it should look won’t be ruined by empty beer bottles, trash, and other shit. Hell, they’ve even been making sure the ashtrays on the screened porch are kept emptied just in case she wants to go out there and sit to get some fresh air.



“Is it safe to enter?” I call through our bedroom door after rapping my knuckles on the door. I can hear her giggling then some paper rustling, before the door is unlocked and flung open.

“Hey, handsome,” she cheerfully states, waving her arms around. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she was drunk, but she seldom drank before she found out she was pregnant, and she definitely doesn’t now. Maybe it’s the Christmas-y smells in here. I can see several candles on the mantle are lit and burning, their scent heavy and somewhat cloying, but not annoyingly so.

“Babe, how... I mean... what the hell?” I sputter out, looking at the sheer disaster our suite is in, right now. “You’ve been up here for an hour at most by yourself.”

She snickers while picking up empty paper rolls and folding them over before shoving them into a garbage bag. “Well, you see what had happened was, I kind of forgot I had more things to wrap, and they were for you, so I had to hurry.”

“Ry?” I cautiously ask, watching the garbage bag rustle.

“Hmm?”

“Babe, where are the kittens?”

“What? Oh, they were on their cat—”

Her voice trails off when she glances over to the corner and doesn’t see either kitten. Then, she looks at the bed but nope, still no fuzzy bodies. I watch her check under the bed, in the bathroom, under the couch and even under the tree, my arms crossed as I try to hold in my mirth. When her face drops and her lip starts to tremble, I finally relent, take her by the shoulders and turn her toward where the garbage bag has now made it to our bedroom door.

Her peals of laughter are pure music to my ears as she flops onto her knees then quickly roots around inside the bag, finally coming out with a kitten in each hand.

“Boys, don’t you know Santa is watching? What if we didn’t notice you were in there? You could’ve died or something!”

Since I don’t want her getting all worked up, I quickly interject and reply, “Babe, there’s no way I wouldn’t have realized they were missing, or hell, even that the garbage typically doesn’t roll around the room.”

She gazes up at me, her eyes sparkling as she starts laughing. “You make a good point, handsome. I guess I need to finish putting all of this up so we can get ready for bed. Did you tell the brothers I was planning to cook brunch around eleven or so?”

“I did.”

“Thank you.”

“Told you, Ryleigh, if it was in my power to give you something or do something for you, I was gonna do it. This is one of those things. Now, let me help you get this sorted out if you’re done because I wanna start a Christmas Eve tradition with my ol’ lady.”

RYLEIGH

“I like this tradition, Brick,” I moan out, his hands gripping my hips as he thrusts upward while I try to keep my balance as I roll my hips in an effort to get more friction against my clit.

“We might have to get a bit creative once the baby gets older, but I think we’ll find time, don’t you?” he replies, grinning up at me.

“Hell yeah,” I say, my breaths now coming in short pants as I feel my pussy fluttering. “Brick!” I keened out, clamping down on his girth as he roars out his own orgasm.

As I flop onto his chest, my lungs begging for oxygen, I kiss the spot right over his heart. “Love you.”

“I love you more.”

“Let’s just stay like this for a little while,” I coax, unwilling to move from the cocoon that is his arms banded around me as his hands stroke up and down

my back.

“I’m good with that, sweetheart.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

RYLEIGH

The excitement thrumming through me right now is palpable. As I typically do, I wake up before Brick, and quickly shower then put on my Christmas pajamas while I wait for him to finally awaken. I have our Christmas tree lights switched on, started the fire in the fireplace since I saw it snowed again overnight and can feel the chill in the air, and have been entertaining myself with Calvin and Hobbes. They've been enjoying the squeezable treats I found for them, as well as the catnip mousies that now litter the sitting area floor.

"Y'all are so silly," I whisper, lifting my eyes and peeking at my stocking through my eyelashes, which is now bulging. It didn't look like that before we went to bed, so I know my ol' man pulled a few sneaky Christmas surprises from underneath his sleeves.

I take a sip of my hot chocolate, glad that we have a small beverage area set up in our room for the basics, because I don't wanna have to get dressed in order to get my morning caffeine from the kitchen. When Brick realized how much I liked waking up to the fireplace and Christmas tree lights, he had one of the prospects build a 'coffee bar' although he's the one that drinks coffee. We each have one of those fancy makers; mine is for my hot chocolate and his is for his coffee, plus there's a wine cooler underneath that currently holds sodas, waters, and beer.

I hear his unmistakable tread and realize he's headed into the bathroom to take care of business, so I put my mug down then go over and start a pod for him so his coffee will be ready when he gets out.

“Looks like your daddy’s finally awake, the sleepyhead,” I purr to both kitties who are now passed out in front of the fire.

“Merry Christmas, Ryleigh,” he says, pulling me against his chest and kissing my neck.

“Merry Christmas, Brick,” I reply, turning into his arms and lifting my face for a kiss which he happily obliges me with until we’re both breathless. “I made your coffee.”

“Woulda gotten it, sweetheart,” he tells me, taking the mug into his hands. My gaze roams down his body, stopping at the dark, long-sleeved Henley, the gray sweatpants, and the thick socks he wears when it’s just us. “Thank you for this. Now, you need to sit down, all that bouncing around can’t be good for the baby.”

I return to my spot on the couch, and he joins me after making a detour at the mantle to grab both stockings. I know I’m acting like a little kid right now, bouncing in my seat, but I’m so darned excited and it really doesn’t have as much to do with what I might have gotten, but the fact I got to shop for every single person who lives here.

Some of the things I found were practical, of course, because it’s important to get items that can be used, others were just for fun, like the silly motorcycle-shaped candy holders for the mens’ stockings. Each of them will deny it until they draw their last breath, but they’ve all got a sweet tooth if the sheer number of goodies they’ve consumed since me and the girls began baking around Thanksgiving is any indication. I also asked a lot of leading questions to find out stuff that each was secretly longing for, from Leathyr hoping to get a tablet she could read on to Stormy wanting a spa pamper day.

I wait for Brick to start opening his presents from his stocking but he’s just sitting there, a smirk playing on his lips “Brick! Go ahead, I wanna see you open your stocking.”

“Ladies first, sweetheart,” he replies, leaning down to scoop up Hobbes who has awakened from his snack-induced nap and is now investigating once again. “C’mon, Ry, you know Phantom and Brew will be the first two waiting in line for you to cook and from the looks of things, Santa has done his due diligence and stopped here. Guess your sign worked.”

I roll my eyes at him as he chuckles, because right outside our door, I put one of those wooden signs up that says, ‘Santa stop here!’ but I put them outside the front door of the clubhouse as well.

“We can’t take chances, Brick, I’m pretty sure Santa doesn’t grade on any kind of a curve and from some of the stories Pops has told me, y’all should probably be on the naughty list.”

His chuckle turns into full-blown laughter and soon I’m joining in because the likelihood that a bunch of bikers believe in a child’s fairytale is pretty much non-existent. Still, it’s been a lot of fun for me and I’m glad he’s humored me. Shaking my head, I start pulling things out of my stocking, my eyes growing wide when I realize everything is wrapped and it’s stuffed down to the toe.

“Go ahead, baby, have some fun.” His voice is soft, and his gaze is gentle, loving as he stares at me. I blink away tears because I’m so happy right now my emotions are all over the place.

Once I’m surrounded by a multitude of gift cards, including several for books I can download onto my e-reader, as well as two bottles of the perfume I mentioned one time liking as far as the smell goes, as well as my favorite candy and gum, I nudge him and nod at his stocking.

“Your turn.”

I’m almost vibrating with excitement now because I picked up some unique things, including a jewelry cleaner kit for the myriad of rings he often wears so I can clean them for him, as well as a thick silver chain. Each link looks like a brick, which I thought was fantastic since that’s his name. He’s also got some gum, a gift card to the local gun shop so he can get his favorite ammo, and a pair of naughty dice. When he opens them then turns his gaze in my direction, I can feel myself blushing.

“Those were um, spur of the moment, more for fun than anything,” I blurt out, my hands now unable to figure out what to do with themselves.

“Kinda thinking some of these will be nice to add to our life,” he drawls out. “Yep, I like them.”

BRICK

There's just one thing I want to make sure she opens today, so once I'm done and my stocking and the contents are off to the side, I lean over and take her face in my hands before kissing her.

"I know we've got more to open, sweetheart, but gotta say, I love what you've gotten me already."

"Me too, Brick. I'm having so much fun!" she enthuses. Her eyes are sparkling, her face is flushed with excitement and possibly a bit of embarrassment over the dice, and I suspect when she gets downstairs and sees what all the brothers, Pops, and Banshee have gotten her, she's going to become an emotional mess.

Standing, I move to the tree and pull over several larger boxes toward her. "These are for the kittens, but I suspect you're going to have to open them because they're busy napping again."

She snickers when she sees they're both at the very top of their cat tree, curled together and sound asleep. "Okay, I'll make that sacrifice."

"Babe, you can tear the paper, I swear they'll make more for you to buy and use next year," I finally tell her when she carefully tears each side. "Otherwise, the guys are gonna riot."

I think that's all the encouragement she needs because paper is soon flying around in reckless abandon while I work to hold my laughter back until she stops, her hand covering her mouth. "Oh, Brick, this is the one I wanted," she softly states, looking at the self-cleaning litter box. "You got two of them?"

"Yeah, because one will go into our actual house while one will stay here," I advise her. "You ready for the next ones?" I prompt once she's got the second one fully unwrapped.

"Yes." She's now biting her lip as I approach with a flat box. Removing the bow, she carefully slides the ribbon from the box then gasps when she pulls out her property cut. "I didn't know if I'd get one of these," she murmurs, her hand lightly stroking and caressing the supple leather.

“Of course, you would, you’re my ol’ lady,” I reply, kneeling in front of her. When she looks up at me, I open the small box that’s been burning a fucking hole in my cut for weeks now and say, “You’ve been mine for more years than it seems possible, Ryleigh. Even when we didn’t know who you truly were, you called to my soul and let me know life wouldn’t be complete unless you were in it. I know in our world, being my ol’ lady is enough for most brothers and the women they love, but I want it all with you. Will you marry me?”

Tears are now coursing down her face even though she’s nodding and smiling. “Yes, yes, I will. If you hadn’t come to check on me when the snowstorm hit, I don’t think it would’ve been too much longer before I reached out to you because I missed you. You’ve become my best friend in the world, and I know you’ll always do whatever it takes to make sure I’m safe. I love you so much, Brick, and even though my life as I knew it was just a bad nightmare, you’ve done everything to ensure I get a happily-ever-after.”

And... now, I don’t much care if my brothers get brunch or not; I want to pick her up and take her back to our bed and spend the day showing her just how much I love her. However, I know she wants to get downstairs so everyone else can get as excited about the day as she has been, so I content myself with sliding the ring on her finger before I pick her up and kiss her passionately.

“We’ll celebrate later, sweetheart. Now, though, how about you put your cut on and let’s see if these lazy fuckers are awake and ready to eat so we can open more presents?”

“I like the way you think, handsome,” she sasses, winking at me. “Can we use the dice too later?”

I chuckle as we head out of our room, listening to the noise level increase the closer we get to the common room.



“Ryleigh, how did you know I wanted one of these?”

“Missy, you did too much!”

“Oh, we’re definitely doing a girl’s day soon!”

Over and over, the club girls and my brothers enthuse and rave over the gifts they’ve been given. Everything from specific bike parts, which I know she had help with since she’s not knowledgeable enough to know much beyond where to sit and where not to put her legs, so she doesn’t get burned, to clothes, tablets, game systems, controllers, and games; my ol’ lady made sure every single breathing individual under this roof got what they wanted for Christmas.

“Um, Pops, I have one more thing for you,” she shyly says. “Can you follow me out to the kitchen area?”

I follow behind his chair and because the brothers I live with are nosy fuckers, they’re all walking behind me as she confidently goes into the kitchen toward the screened porch. “What did you do, missy?” Pops asks.

“Nothing major,” she insists, opening the door and standing back so he can motor his way through.

“Ryleigh.” Pops’ voice is quieter than I’ve ever heard him, almost reverent and I stick my head out to see a puppy sitting there, its tongue lolling out with a giant red bow around its neck. “Sweetheart, it’s too much.”

“Pops, it’s a Cane Corso, they’re good for protection and I figured with you being in a chair, you might like the company. She’s already set up for training too, you just have to call the kennel and they’ll get it scheduled for you.”

Banshee elbows me as we both watch my pops and ol’ lady with the puppy. She’s been quivering in place but until Ry tells her to come, she doesn’t move which lets me know she’s already got some basic training.

“Fuck, look at him,” Ban murmurs as we both watch my pops quickly swipe below his eye.

“Yeah, I think she affects all of us that way, brother,” I admit, my voice a bit

hoarse as I hold back my own emotions watching the two of them. “How did she know he’s been wanting a dog?”

“She was used to being seen and not heard, brother, but she sure the fuck pays attention,” Phantom advises. “Not sure who’s had the best Christmas, us or her, but I’m thinking it might be a draw at this point.”

“No kidding, brother, no kidding.”

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EPILOGUE

BRICK

“Merry Christmas, Brick.” Her voice is sated as I carry her to our bed.

After brunch and presents, I brought her back to our room for a much-needed nap. Okay, maybe some celebrating too, but that’s just between us. Leathyr and Layce took over making dinner, which everyone pretty much demolished before we sat around eating cookies and watching movies.

Then, I made our excuses once again so I could spoil my ol’ lady some more with a bubble bath then a massage, before we enjoyed ourselves a little bit more underneath the Christmas tree.

Hell, if she wasn’t pregnant and I wasn’t getting older, we’d have slept under the tree, but I’m not into being unable to move the next day, so to the bed it is.

Once she’s tucked into my side where she belongs, I kiss her and whisper, “Merry Christmas, Ryleigh, and welcome home.”

BANSHEE

The joy I feel at the fact my sister is at home and alive knows absolutely no restraint. Even still, I harbor a lot of guilt about the day that changed all of our lives.

Because I wasn’t paying close enough attention, she got taken out from underneath our noses.

Because she was nabbed, our parents were never the same.

Because they were trying to find some peace and were out riding, those fuckers were able to ambush them, run them off the road and kill them.

And it's all my fault.

THE END FOR NOW...BANSHEE'S LAMENT WILL COME OUT IN 2023 SO STAY TUNED!

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ABOUT DARLENE

I am a transplanted Yankee, moving from upstate New York when I was a teenager. I'm a mom of four and grandma of nine who has found a love of traveling that I never knew existed! I live with the brat-cat pack (all rescues) as well as a little doxie-doodle named Bosco 'deep in the heart of Texas', as I plot and plan who will get to "talk" next!

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